

A Christian Vedanta?
Bede Griffiths and the Hindu-Christian Encounter

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Abstract

Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) was an English convert to Catholicism who spent almost half his life as a monk in India. Like many other prominent Christian writers of the twentieth century he was influenced by Indian religions; yet while others primarily sought to compare Christianity to these traditions, Bede Griffiths even implemented notions from Hinduism into his own theology, and desired to express Christian doctrines in the terminology of Vedanta, which is one of the most prominent traditions within Hinduism.

Bede Griffiths' exposition on Hinduism is part of his theological project, and I will discuss to what degree his exposition on Hinduism is influenced by the development of his theological understanding at large, and how his evaluation of different Hindu traditions changes throughout his work.

Interestingly, of all the different systems of Vedanta, Bede Griffiths was particularly fascinated by the school of Advaita, which is perhaps more dissimilar to conventional Christian theology than any other system of Vedanta. I will explore how his evaluation of Advaita Vedanta and other Hindu traditions is not only based on, but also affected by how he chooses to present Hinduism.

My dissertation will show how Bede Griffiths may serve as an example of interreligious encounter, and how interreligious ecumenism is affected not only by the participants' outlook, but also by their description of the religious traditions with which they seek to engage. While Bede Griffiths considered his conclusions to be in line with his Catholicism, I will discuss to what extent notions found in his writings are actually representative of the beliefs of Christianity and Hinduism as they are normally understood.

My survey of Bede Griffiths' writings will show that while he was taken with the idea of interreligious dialogue, his engagement with Hinduism may rather be described as an encounter with Hindu beliefs than with Hindu believers. I will also show that his theology is based on the understanding of a common mystery referred to by all the world religions, a notion which may be at odds with the very premises of Vedanta.

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I am also indebted to Wilhelm Konrad and Mike Marchetti, Ph.D. for sharing their own experiences on the Hindu-Christian encounter. Finally, my gratitude to Swami B.S. Govinda for his observations on Christianity, as seen from the perspective of Vaishnava Vedanta.

Introduction

Bede Griffiths and the Task of Ecumenism

In March 1955, the Benedictine monk Dom Bede Griffiths (hereafter simply referred to under his monastic name, Bede, following the usage of Wayne Teasdale and Shirley du Boulay¹), aged 48, departed from Britain by boat, travelling to Bombay in order to help establish the contemplative life within the Catholic Church in India, and to “discover the other half” of his soul.² He soon received the *kavi* dress traditionally worn by Hindu *samnyasins* and lead an austere monastic life in Catholic *ashrams* until his death in 1993. Originally an Oxford student, Bede studied Hinduism and other Asian religious traditions for decades. He called for an interreligious dialogue years before the Second Vatican Council; yet even though he spent almost half his life in India, he only rarely interacted with Hindu leaders, and he found most Hindus to be uninterested in dialogue. From his Indian *ashram* he produced hundreds of articles and a variety of books on the Hindu-Christian encounter that were aimed not at Indian Hindus but at a Christian audience in the industrialised world.

Bede is one of several noteworthy twentieth-century Catholic thinkers who considered the study of Hinduism and Buddhism as rewarding for Christian spirituality and theology. Many of them proceeded to write insightful studies on Hinduism and Buddhism, including Thomas Merton, John Main, Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating, William Johnston and Klaus Klostermaier, whose experiences as a priest in Vrindavan in the 1960’s we shall return to in the conclusion.

In some ways Bede went further than most Christians in his engagement with Hinduism: not only did he wear the *kavi*, but he even developed a liturgy that included elements from Hindu rituals; he established the reading of non-Christian scriptures and the recital of Hindu hymns as part of the daily programme followed at his ashram, and he developed a theology in which Vedantic terms were incorporated. He published a 300-page Christian commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* and wrote extensively on the various systems of Vedanta. Bede not only related to Hinduism on a comparative level: he also included elements from Hinduism both in his theology, his liturgy and his monastic practices.

From the 1970’s onwards Bede gradually achieved renown as a spiritual teacher. He travelled internationally to give lectures, and more than a hundred visitors might stay at his

¹ For details on these two authors, see ‘Sources’ below, p. 11.

² This expression (which is also the title of a tributary volume dedicated to Bede, described below) is found in

ashram at any given time. Yet towards the end of his life, he would confess to members of his ashram community that he felt “left all alone”, and that he felt that he had not conveyed his message successfully.³ Indeed, while Bede was criticised by Catholic theologians, local Church authorities in India as well as by Hindus, his writings have received little attention both within the fields of theology and religious studies. To my knowledge the only major studies published on Bede so far are written from a theological perspective. Neither have any doctoral theses or MA dissertations been written specifically on Bede by students of religious studies, as opposed to several such works by theologians.⁴

While Bede’s attempt to analyse Hinduism from the perspective of Catholic theology is certainly not unique, he gradually became so familiar with Hinduism that he would shift freely between Hindu and Christian terms when elaborating on a particular topic; similarly, he gradually understood Hindu Vedanta and Christian theology as relating to a single, transcendent reality, even if this reality was expressed and experienced differently within the two traditions. Yet while the fascination for Hinduism remained fixed throughout Bede’s writings, his *approach* changed substantially: both his understanding of the complexity of Hinduism, the significance allotted to various Hindu traditions and their significance in the context of his own theology and Christianity at large underwent significant changes, a fact Bede would readily acknowledge. It is this many-faceted approach to Hinduism in Bede’s writings which will be the topic for this dissertation.

Hinduism is an enormously complex phenomenon which stretches across several millennia and includes a number of highly distinct traditions, many of which, such as Vedanta, have a rich internal discourse with distinct schools of interpretation. From his earliest writings on Hinduism Bede identifies Vedanta as particularly significant for his own theological project, and his discussion of Vedanta is far more comprehensive than his treatment of any other aspect of Hinduism. Furthermore, Bede identified the study of Vedanta as particularly fruitful not only for Christian theology, but also for the wider study of Hinduism. Equally, he gradually came to present Vedanta as the paradigmatic example of what he called “the Cosmic Revelation.” Accordingly I have chosen to focus on Vedanta as a leitmotif in my

Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1982), 7-8: “I remember writing to a friend at the time: ‘I want to discover the other half of my soul.’”

³ Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc, 1998), 265.

⁴ I base this assumption on the list of theses and dissertations published at the website of the Bede Griffiths Trust, which includes theses and dissertations submitted between 1981 and 2007 (The Bede Griffiths Trust,

study of Bede's presentation of Hinduism, even though this focus will not be exclusive—something which would in any case not be feasible in a study of Bede's writings on Vedanta, as we shall see. Rather, I will use Vedanta as a point of reference throughout my dissertation, and provide excursions into other aspects of Bede's presentation of Hinduism where this is called for in order to arrive at an accurate understanding of his reflections on Vedanta. Similarly, as Bede's more general observations on religion and its significance changed in several important regards throughout his writings, this will be discussed to the extent that such changes affect his approach to Hinduism.

Among the schools of Vedanta, Advaita Vedanta remains of particular interest for Bede throughout his literary production. Yet his evaluation of both Shankara and the notion of *advaita* changes repeatedly during the course of his writings. In this dissertation I have chosen to focus on Vedanta as a category which is broader than *advaita* (a key issue in Bede's writings), yet more narrow than Hinduism (which is the context in which Bede evaluates the various aspects of Vedanta in his oeuvre.) Accordingly, my dissertation is neither intended as an in-depth analysis restricted to Bede's shifting evaluation of *advaita* nor as a broad study of his approach to Hinduism in its full width, but rather as an analysis of his exposition on various aspects of Vedanta, as it develops throughout his writings. In this dissertation I will try to analyse Bede's presentation of Vedanta by focusing on three separate topics:

1. Bede's reflections on Vedanta are part of his theological writings. How does his presentation of Vedanta relate to this wider theological project? How do the details of his theological position affect his presentation of Hinduism?
2. When writing on such a many-faceted religion as Hinduism, Bede makes a selection as to which aspects he considers to be of relevance for his theological project. What may be said to characterise Bede's presentation of Hinduism? Which aspects of Hinduism are included in his writings, and what is emphasised as being particularly important in the context of his focus on Vedanta, and what is criticised? What aspects of Hindu theology are omitted altogether?
3. The focus on *advaita* and the school of Advaita Vedanta is more or less constant throughout Bede's writings on Hinduism, whether it is presented so as to highlight the importance of Hinduism for Christian theology, to show what Bede perceived as flaws in Hinduism, or to compare various aspects of Hinduism with one another. Yet Advaita Vedanta is just one of several Vedantic traditions, and while the other major schools of Vedanta have a theistic outlook, Bede primarily refers to the non-theistic school of Advaita Vedanta with its

monistic overtones. Why does he choose to maintain this focus on *advaita*, often to the exclusion of other Vedantic notions that may be more in harmony with Christian theology in general and even Bede's own theological position?

In summary, the topic of my dissertation may be summarised as follows: How does Bede present Vedanta in the context of his wider exposition of Hinduism, as expressed in his theological writings, and why is the focus of *advaita* so prominent in his theological project?

Bede's engagement with Hinduism may be approached from several different perspectives. While theologians have attempted to analyse Bede's theology and his interest in Hinduism, to my knowledge several areas of his spirituality remain largely unexplored by the human sciences.⁵ Possible topics for the study of Bede's spirituality include the liturgy developed at Shantivanam (relevant both in the context of religious studies and theology), Shantivanam as a religious community (which may be approached either from a sociological perspective or from that of Christian ecclesiology), Shantivanam as a monastic phenomenon, and the ecumenical milieu at Shantivanam during Bede's lifetime. Within the field of religious studies, one may also study Bede's theology in the context of psychology, postcolonialism, Orientalism or the New Age movement.

In this dissertation I want to explore Bede's presentation of Vedanta as found in his major writings, findings which may provide the premises for further analysis. This is not, then, an attempt to formulate a comprehensive survey of Bede's theological system as such or to explore the wider implications of Bede's engagement with Hinduism from any of the disciplines just mentioned in detail, except for short comments on passages and notions in Bede's works that are particularly relevant for a more theoretical approach.

Neither is my dissertation intended to provide a complete survey of the importance of Hinduism for Bede as expressed in all of his writings, which span thousands of pages; rather, my dissertation is a textual study focusing on specific parts of his work with the intention of showing how Vedanta is presented in these particular writings. While I will comment briefly on the importance of sources mentioned by Bede himself, I will generally not attempt to trace other influences on his writings, a complex task which would in any case not be directly relevant for the topic of this dissertation.

As this dissertation is intended to provide an exposition on the topic of Vedanta in Bede's writings, I will include numerous quotations throughout my analysis of his publications. I

⁵ See footnote four. A list of extensive studies published on Bede can be found below on page 13.

consider this to be appropriate, as many significant nuances may be lost by way of paraphrasing Bede's writings rather than quoting him verbatim. I have, however, chosen to restrict my use of quotations by making them as brief and to the point as possible.

An important aspect of Bede's exposition of Hinduism is his use of Sanskrit terms by which he attempts to compare Hinduism and Christianity. Accordingly his use of such terms will be a focal part of my study. My dissertation is not, however, intended to be a detailed analysis of Bede's use of Hindu terminology as such; rather, I will try to use such terms as points of reference which may be helpful for arriving at an accurate understanding of Vedanta and Hinduism as it is presented in Bede's writings.

As per the advice of Professor Per Kværne, I have refrained from using diacritical signs as this would not add to the clarity of my dissertation. In one or two cases diacritical signs are used in passages quoted, and these are of course reproduced in my dissertation. In accordance with academic standards, technical terms from the Sanskrit not commonly used in English are written in italics. I have chosen to use the term "Advaita Vedanta" instead of simply "Advaita" when referring to the tradition stemming from Shankara, so as to not confuse the *school* of Advaita Vedanta with the philosophical notion of *advaita*. While I try to be consistent in my use of British spelling and punctuation, as the reader may notice there are variances between the spelling of both Sanskrit and English terms in passages quoted from Bede's works, some of which were published in the US.

Bede's writings on Vedanta extend from his time as a Benedictine monk in Britain in 1954 until the very last years before his death in 1993. During this period substantial changes took place in the Catholic Church. As may be expected, one can trace numerous developments in Bede's theological writings, both as far as his discussion of Catholicism and Hinduism are concerned. Does Bede evaluate the importance of Vedanta for Christian theology differently during the various stages of his development as a Christian theologian? Does his focus shift from an emphasis on the importance of Vedanta to other aspects of Hinduism, and does his affinity change from one particular aspect of Vedanta, i.e. *advaita*, to the more theistically oriented Vedantic traditions? In order to answer these questions, which I judge to be crucial in order to arrive at a clear understanding of the significance of Vedanta in Bede's writings, I have chosen to approach his works chronologically, through a sequential survey of his works, followed by a more general analysis in the conclusion.

The issue of whether Bede may most aptly be described simply as a theologian, as a monastic theologian, as a contemplative theologian, as a mystic, or not as a theologian at all has been

discussed in several of the works on Bede mentioned below. Another possible approach to Bede's writings may be to simply consider them as works on Christian spirituality. Even though this issue is not of immediate relevance in the context of the questions raised in this dissertation, the very fact that Bede's standing as a writer of works on theological matters is discussed at all points to an important fact, i.e. that Bede did not have any formal training as an academic theologian. While he sometimes refers to particular ideas from the works of prominent Catholic theologians, these notions are generally not discussed in the larger context of the underlying theological projects in which they occur. This notwithstanding, Bede certainly wrote works on theological matters, and for our purpose it will suffice to identify him simply as a theologian, in the sense that he is a Christian writer elaborating on theological questions.

The issue of Bede's intended public is important in order to analyze his writings. By academic standards Bede was not an expert in any particular field; neither did he write with an academic audience in mind. His writings were not published by academic publishers, but rather by publishers of religious literature or literature of general interest. While it may be presumed that Bede hoped his work would receive attention from theologians and other scholars, they seem to be aimed at general readers with an interest in Catholic and Hindu spirituality; they presuppose little or no knowledge of the topics at hand. Yet while Bede did not seek to adhere to strictly scholarly standards, he certainly aspired to be both accountable and nuanced in his presentation of the topics discussed. In my approach to Bede's writings I will be treating these as religious literature (in the sense that they are written by a Christian with the aim of expounding his beliefs), and not as academic studies.

Several writers within the field of what Judson Trapnell has termed "Bedean studies"⁶ have observed the lack of consistency in Bede's writings. As we shall see, terms and concepts are often given quite different interpretations by Bede even within quite short passages. While Trapnell makes the point that Bede was "aware that many terms are used rather loosely"⁷, I will try to show how this lack of consistency makes it somewhat difficult to arrive at an accurate understanding of certain parts of Bede's writings. Yet at the same time, many of the inconsistencies and ambiguities found in his writings point to important aspects of Bede's approach to Hinduism that are not always immediately visible, but which may be traced from

⁶ Wayne Teasdale, "Foreword: Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB Cam.: A Personal Remembrance," in *A Human Search: Bede Griffiths Reflects on His Life*, ed. by John Swindells, xviii.

⁷ Judson B. Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 65.

a careful reading of his books. Several issues raised by such inconsistencies and ambiguities identified throughout my survey of Bede's writings will be discussed in the conclusion.

Sources

There are ample primary sources for the study of Bede's theology. The very scope of his writings would make it difficult to undertake a consistent study of all these sources in a dissertation such as this. For this reason I have chosen to omit certain parts of his writings from my study.

Bede created a huge literary output that spans from the 1930's until 1992. A large part of his writings consists of essays, articles and letters to the editor published in newspapers, magazines and journals. According to Wayne Teasdale the number of articles written by Bede totals more than 300, some of which remain unpublished.⁸

Another part of Bede's output are the countless interviews, discourses and talks he gave at Shantivanam or while on tour, some of which were later recorded and transcribed by different editors. Some of these continue to be published posthumously, such as in the periodicals of the Bede Griffiths Trust. In addition to these sources, Bede maintained a wide correspondence with friends and readers worldwide, writing up to twenty letters a day.

Except for the essays Bede collected in the anthology *Christ in India*, I have chosen to omit these shorter writings from my study. Similarly Bede's talks and discourses are not included in my analysis, except those that were later edited and published in book format in agreement with Bede during his own lifetime, and included in the books mentioned below. Neither will I discuss his letters, except for brief excerpts printed in the biographies and monographs described below.

Bede published and edited more than ten books. This includes a translation of the Syrian liturgy into English, an anthology of biblical psalms, an anthology of writings from the world religions as well as a volume with excerpts from some of his favourite authors on a variety of different topics. These four works also remain outside the scope of this dissertation, which will focus on all the books published during Bede's own lifetime that deal with the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity. This includes the following nine publications:

1. *The Golden String: An Autobiography*. An autobiographical volume which also contains early theological reflections. First published in 1954, reissued with a new foreword in 1979.

⁸ Wayne Teasdale, "Introduction: Bede Griffiths as Visionary Guide," in *The Other Half of my Soul*, ed. by Beatrice Bruteau, 7.

2. *Christ in India*. An anthology of essays written during Bede's time in India before he moved to Shantivanam. First published under the title *Christian Ashram* in 1966, reissued under this new title, with a new introduction, in 1984.
3. *Vedanta and Christian Faith*. First published in 1973. Contains a series of edited by Bede himself. A later edition of the same work was published in 1991 with an additional talk of Bede's, edited by Wayne Teasdale.
4. *Return to the Centre*, published in 1976.
5. *The Cosmic Revelation*, published 1983. Consists of lectures given in 1979, co-edited by Bede and John Sullivan.
6. *The Marriage of East and West*, published in 1982.
7. *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, published in 1987. Based on talks given by Bede, this volume is edited by Felicity Edwards. The introduction is written by Bede.
8. *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith*, published in 1989. Based on talks given by Bede, edited by Felicity Edwards.
9. *The New Creation in Christ: Meditation and Community*, published in 1991. Based on talks and answers given by Bede to questions asked by the public, this book is edited by Robert Kiely and Laurence Freeman.

When using terms such as "Bede's writings," "Bede's works," etc. in this dissertation, I am always referring to these nine books, unless otherwise specified. Of these works five consist of talks, one of essays, and another of autobiographical memoirs. Only *Return to the Centre* and *The Marriage of East and West* are extensive and continuous works on theological matters actually edited and written by Bede.

Although Bede sometimes made reference to his previous works in his writings, this occurs only rarely. In part, of course, this may be explained by the fact that the material on which the majority of Bede's books were based was originally delivered as lectures. While I will try to discern a development throughout these nine books, it is also important to point out that even though there is a certain thematic continuity between them, they should all be studied as separate works.

So far, only two extensive studies have been published on Bede's theology. The earliest of the two is Wayne Teasdale's doctoral thesis in theology first published in 1987, later republished in a slightly updated version as *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought* in 2003. The second major study on Bede is Judson B. Trapnell's work *Bede Griffiths: A Life*

in *Dialogue*, published in 2001. While they both discuss Bede's theology and his understanding of Hinduism, Trapnell is more focused on understanding Bede's writings in a biographical context, with numerous references to theological as well as other influences on Bede, whereas Teasdale's study is more narrowly focused on Bede's theology and its possible implications for the Church. Teasdale's study also does not elaborate as extensively on Bede's later works as Trapnell's; Trapnell, on the other hand, even includes numerous quotations from articles, letters and other sources which illuminate many aspects of Bede's theology.

The anthology *The Other Half of My Soul: Bede Griffiths and the Hindu-Christian Dialogue* contains a series of essays, personal memories and poems written in memory of Bede, published in 1996. Many of the texts in this tributary volume are not directly relevant for this study, and only a few are written by scholars who write on Bede's theology from an academic perspective. I will also refer to a critical article by Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, two Catholic academics who criticise several aspects of Bede's theological project in their article *The Swami from Oxford* (also referred to by Trapnell), first published in the magazine *Crisis*.

The first biography on Bede, Kathryn Spink's *A Sense of the Sacred*, was published during his own lifetime. A second, more detailed biography has later been published by Shirley du Boulay (*Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths*). Du Boulay includes numerous quotations from Bede's correspondence as well as excerpts from unpublished articles. Both of these biographies also deal with various aspects of Bede's theology in a summary manner; du Boulay's biography is far more comprehensive, and was authorised by the Bede Griffiths Trust.

Another biographical document on Bede is *A Human Search: Bede Griffiths Reflects on His Life*, edited by John Swindells. This work is particularly interesting since it contains some of Bede's last recorded reflections on his own life and teachings, originally recorded on video to be used in a documentary on Bede shortly before his penultimate, debilitating stroke. While this work consists of material spoken by Bede himself, I have chosen to treat it as a secondary source, which is referred to only in order to highlight points in Bede's other works. Unlike all my primary sources, *A Human Search* was neither edited by Bede himself, nor published under his supervision. And while several of the books that I analyse are also based on oral discourses, they were given as lectures, which is not the case with the rather informal interviews included in *A Human Search*.

1. Dom Bede Griffiths: A Biographical Sketch

Before proceeding to study Bede's writings, I will present an overview of his life, including his education, his encounter with Catholic monasticism and his introduction to Hinduism, which all influenced his subsequent life as a Christian *samnyasin* and author in India.

Born in 1906, Alan Richard Griffiths grew up in quiet, rural surroundings in the years before The Great War. The middle-class family household into which he was born was managed almost entirely by his mother; his father remained a debilitated and distant figure after losing his share in a business. Despite their formal adherence to the Anglican Church, according to Kathryn Spink religion was never an important part of his upbringing.⁹

Excelling at school, Bede went on to study Classics and Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford. Here he met C.S. Lewis, developing a friendship that was to last until the latter's death in 1963. The friendship was particularly strong during the period when the two would mutually inspire one another in their approach to the Christian faith. C.S. Lewis later dedicated his book *Surprised by Joy* to Bede.

From an early age, Bede was taken with romantic poetry, memorising and reciting such poets as Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Reverence for nature was another lifelong passion of Bede's; in his youth he was also attracted by socialism, pacifism and social critique, being inspired by authors like Shaw and Ibsen. Along with two fellow students that were to become lifelong friends, after leaving Oxford Bede passed several months in a simple cottage at Cotswolds. Here the three would follow a strict regime of manual labour, personal studies and meals taken in common, gradually including the study of the King James translation of the Bible as part of their daily regime.

In the early 1930's Bede went through a transformational period during which he engaged with the Christian tradition at various levels, including the study of classic works of spirituality and theology, praying and fasting. He even considered a possible vocation as a minister within the Anglican Church. Both Bede and his biographers mention the severity of the personal struggles he experienced during this period.¹⁰ Finally, on Christmas Eve 1932 he formally entered the Catholic Church at Farnborough Abbey, where he took his final vows as a Benedictine monk in 1937, becoming an ordained priest in 1940.

⁹ Kathryn Spink, *A Sense of the Sacred: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (London: SPCK, 1988), 43-44.

¹⁰ Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1984), 7.

By way of a suffragette and theosophist friend of his mother's, Bede was introduced to classics such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Dhammapada* and *Lao Tzu*. Contact with the psychoanalyst Toni Sussmann (one of Jung's students) in the 1940's prompted a deeper interest in Eastern religious traditions, in particular Hinduism and Buddhism. This interest was gradually strengthened during the next years. In Bede's own words, he "now began to study the history of Chinese and Indian philosophy systematically."¹¹

From the 1930's onwards, Bede contributed a long series of articles to Catholic magazines and newspapers. These writings constitute his first literary output, primarily intended for a Catholic audience. At the prompting of others, Bede would in 1954 publish *The Golden Sting*, an autobiographical work that received critical acclaim, and which awarded him a certain fame as an author.

In 1955, after holding various positions in several British Benedictine monasteries, Bede set off for India with the intention of founding a contemplative Catholic community in India, desiring to find "the other half of my soul."¹² Initially he participated in the establishment of a foundation outside Bangalore, but this project that was soon abandoned in favour of another new foundation, Kurisumala Ashram in Kerala.

While in Bangalore Bede became a close friend of Raimon Panikkar's. The two studied Sanskrit together for a period of several months, but Bede repeatedly confessed to only having a limited understanding of the language, what would in the words of his biographer Katryn Spink amount to "a working knowledge of Sanskrit."¹³

Kurisumala Ashram was co-founded by Bede and Fr. Francis Mahieu, a Belgian Cistercian who headed the venture. While the Bangalore foundation may have been austere by European standards, in Kurisumala the monks went further still: they followed a strict vegetarian diet, disposed of cutlery, wore the traditional Indian *kavi* robe, lived in thatched huts and discontinued using all but the most essential furniture. They followed the Benedictine rule, while also including elements from Cistercian monastic practices. During this period Bede also assumed the name Swami Bede Dayananda, a title that he used only rarely.

At Kurisumala Bede continued his study of the Hindu religious tradition, practising *ashtanga yoga* and writing on the Hindu-Christian encounter. However, it gradually became clear that Mahieu and Bede disagreed on several important topics. When Mahieu was

¹¹ Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String: An Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1979), 171.

¹² See footnote 1 for details on this expression of Bede's.

¹³ Spink, *A Sense of the Sacred*, 133.

requested to take over another ashram (Saccidananda Ashram), he chose to remain at Kurisumala, offering the managerial position of Saccidananda Ashram to Bede.

Saccidananda Ashram (hereafter referred to as Shantivanam, following Bede's own usage) was founded in 1950 by two French pioneers within the field of Catholic ashram monasticism, Fr. Jules Monchanin (who passed away in 1957) and Henri le Saux. Le Saux had stayed with Ramana Maharishi for an extended period in 1948, and gradually yearnings for a more solitary life led him to abandon Shantivanam in favour of a Himalayan hermitage.¹⁴ It was at this time that Bede moved to Shantivanam. According to Trapnell this transition, which occurred in 1968, marks a new phase Bede's spiritual sentiment, which is reflected in his writings: "Something in Griffiths's contemplative life had transformed his perspective: He speaks now with great assurance about the absolute and universal nature of the experience of the divine mystery beyond all concepts and images."¹⁵

The ashram at Shantivanam was to pass through several difficult periods characterised by ecclesial and managerial struggles, but by the 1980's both Bede and the ashram had come to gain a certain international repute, a fact which is undoubtedly connected with the publication of four of Bede's major works between 1976 and 1987.

From the 1960's Bede travelled quite widely, giving lectures, leading retreats and attending conferences in the USA, Europe, Australia and Asia, including the monastic conference in 1968 in Bangkok where the Trappist monk Thomas Merton passed away.¹⁶ Many, if not most, of his travel engagements were arranged by various Catholic organisations.

Bede met with leading representatives of several religious and non-religious groups, such as Swami Shivananda, Vinoba Bhave, the Dalai Lama, John Main and others, but for the most part such contact was quite limited. In his later years he also maintained contact with several representatives of what he referred to as the "new science", including Rupert Sheldrake and Ken Wilber.

Since leaving for India in 1955, Bede had maintained his position as an exclaustated Benedictine monk. In 1980 he entered the Camaldolese congregation, which accommodates for solitaries, coenobites and even itinerant monks. The Camaldolese also engage in interreligious dialogue and accept visiting guests. All of these elements seemed well suited

¹⁴ According to Teasdale, Le Saux "was the first Christian known ever to sit at the feet of an Indian master, that is, to submit to one as a disciple." (Wayne Teasdale: *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2003), 34).

¹⁵ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 149.

¹⁶ Incidentally, to my best knowledge Bede hardly ever refers to Merton, and he does not seem to be influenced by Merton's writings.

both for Bede's own spirituality and for the ashram at Shantivanam. In 1982, Shantivanam was welcomed as a part of the Camaldolese congregation.

In 1990 Bede suffered a stroke, but he continued to travel abroad until 1992, when he suffers a second, debilitating stroke. He passed away in 1993, having already taken part in the foundation of the Bede Griffiths Trust.

Writing on his relationship with Bede, Wayne Teasdale states that "[w]hat I noticed about him from the very beginning was a marvellous quality of openness, an enthusiasm, and a spontaneity."¹⁷ As noted by his biographer Shirley du Boulay, Bede maintained an intellectual curiosity throughout his life¹⁸, reading widely, especially within the fields of theology, poetry and religion. At times he would modify or completely reverse his position on various questions, while also continuously addressing new issues even as an octogenarian. Despite spending several decades on the Indian subcontinent, he maintained his Oxford accent and gentleman-like behaviour, only starting to express his feelings more freely after the stroke in 1990.

Certain personality traits characterise Bede all through his adult life, such as a contemplative inclination, appreciation of nature, and an ongoing intellectual pursuit of both Christian and non-Christian traditions, foremost of which was Hinduism. Trapnell even points out how "[t]he roots of Griffiths's later expressions of *advaita* may be found within this early experience of the divine in nature."¹⁹

While he was sometimes at odds with elements within the Church, supporting clerical marriage and intercommunion as early as the 1960's²⁰, his biographers as well as the theologians Trapnell and Teasdale portray him as always remaining loyal to the Church.

Bede was to spend his first 48 years in Britain, and the remaining 38 years in India. According to Judson Trapnell, Bede

plays the role of what Karl Joachim Weintraub has called a "culture bearer." Weintraub, citing Augustine as a clear example, describes those unique individuals in a society who through their upbringing and education fully "bear" the surrounding culture within them and yet "lose trust" in the very ideals of that culture. Such persons then experience a fundamental disorientation, no longer able to rely upon their culture to guide their life journey. In reorienting themselves by establishing an ideal that goes beyond yet integrates existing values, such individuals serve to transform the culture itself.²¹

¹⁷ Wayne Teasdale, "Foreword: Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB Cam.: A Personal Remembrance," in *A Human Search: Bede Griffiths Reflects on His Life*, ed. by John Swindells, xi.

¹⁸ Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 86.

¹⁹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 32.

²⁰ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 171.

²¹ Judson Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 8.

While this may be so, Bede often felt alone and dejected, being described as “a loner” by a Benedictine acquaintance.²² As alluded to in the introduction, Shirley du Boulay points out that even at the end of his life, Bede “did not feel that his life had been a success or that he had succeeded in conveying his message.”²³

In his autobiographical work *The Golden String*, Bede emphasises several extraordinary spiritual experiences that occurred during prayer, as well as profoundly intense experiences of nature in his childhood as formative and decisive episodes in his life. From the 1940’s he maintained a lifelong practice of the hesychast Jesus Prayer, and his critical views of modern society with its technological and scientific development remained ambiguous throughout his life.

In an interview with Judson B. Trapnell, Bede “discerned three stages in his lifelong surrender: God in nature, God in Christ and the Church, and *advaita* or “nonduality.””²⁴ Trapnell structures his monograph *Bede Griffiths: A Life in Dialogue* around this scheme, dating the first period as lasting from Bede’s birth until his entry into the Catholic Church (1906-1932). The second period lasts until Bede moves to Shantivanam in 1968, when the ultimate stage of his life unfolded. As we shall see, this scheme is also reflected in Bede’s depiction of Vedanta.

²² Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 105.

²³ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 265.

²⁴ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 5.

2. Early Attempts: *The Golden String* and *Christ in India*

It is during the final stage of Bede's life, outlined in the previous chapter as lasting from 1968 onwards, that the great bulk of his writings are published. For our purposes it is useful to characterise these 25 years as a single, unified period; despite the inner tensions found in the writings produced by Bede during this final part of his life, on several fundamental issues they are markedly different from opinions expressed in Bede's two first books, *The Golden String* and *Christ in India*.

Bede was well aware of paradigmatic changes within his oeuvre. *The Marriage of East and West* is introduced with the following observation:

When I wrote *The Golden String*, telling the story of my search for God, which led me to the Catholic Church and to a Benedictine monastery, I thought that I had reached the end of my journey, at least as far as this world was concerned. But in fact, even while I was writing *The Golden String*, a new era was to begin in my life, which was to bring about changes, as profound as any that had gone before.²⁵

2.1. Fulfilment in Christianity: *The Golden String*

Such "profound changes" can easily be traced in Bede's writings. In "Catholicism," the concluding chapter of *The Golden String*, he presents some general observations on the world religions. While this discussion does not cover more than four or five pages, it nevertheless provides us with pertinent information for gaining an understanding of Bede's early perspective on the significance and validity of Hindu theology.

Even at this early point, Bede concludes that "Indian philosophy can hardly be over-estimated. It marks the supreme achievement of the human mind in the natural order in its quest of a true conception of God."²⁶ A few pages later, he concludes that "[i]n the Hindu conception of the Atma and the Chinese conception of the Tao we have perhaps the most profound of all insights into this mystery, by which mankind has been prepared for its final revelation in Christ."²⁷ The distinction between Christianity and the "natural order" is sharpened further when Bede concludes that

[a]ll religious traditions contain some elements of the truth, but there is only one absolutely true religion; all religions have taught something of the way of salvation, but there is only one true Way. ... In the same way we must believe that there is one Church, which was founded on the rock of Peter, to be the salvation for all mankind."²⁸

²⁵ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 7.

²⁶ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 171.

²⁷ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 174.

²⁸ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 176-77.

This last remark may of course be interpreted as pointing to a fundamental divide between Catholicism and non-Catholic confessions within Christianity, a notion which is not reiterated in Bede's later writings.

In his essay *Multireligious experience and the Study of Mysticism*, Judson B. Trapnell presents a conclusion which may be substantiated by the above quotes from *The Golden String*, summarising Bede's position on non-Christian religions as follows:

At the time of his emigration to India, Griffiths endorsed what has come to be known as the "fulfillment theory," according to which the numerous non-Christian traditions are understood as providential means through which God has prepared humankind for the revelation of Jesus Christ, a revelation that in turn fulfills all other religions.²⁹

While acknowledging his estimation for Hindu and Taoist ideas, Bede also maintains that "[i]f these ideas could be interpreted in the full light of divine revelation it is possible that they would lead to a development in theology no less significant than its original development through the influence of Greek philosophy."³⁰ Thus, while clearly separating between "revealed" (i.e., Christian) and "natural" religion (a category which accommodates all non-Christian systems of belief and which is of a "preparatory" nature), certain elements from these "natural" religions are described by Bede even in his first book as potentially *enriching* for Christian doctrine, and not just as valid insofar as they are supportive of, or in agreement with Christianity. This conclusion must have been decisive for Bede's decision to approach Hinduism at such a profound level, as it validates and perhaps even calls for interreligious engagement.

2.2. A Closer Analysis of Hinduism: *Christ in India*

Bede's approach to and description of Hinduism are in many regards quite similar in his next book, a collection of essays written between 1955 and 1965 entitled *Christian Ashram*, first published in 1966 (and hereafter referred to under the title of the later edition of the same work, *Christ in India*³¹). The essays included in this volume were first published in Catholic journals. Just as in *The Golden String*, Bede also makes statements that support the fulfilment theory in this second work:

²⁹ Judson B. Trapnell, "Multireligious experience and the Study of Mysticism," in *The Other Half of My Soul*, ed. by Beatrice Bruteau, 206.

³⁰ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 174.

³¹ As discussed in the introduction, this book was first published in Britain in 1966, and later re-published in the US with a new introduction by the author in 1984.

It can even be asserted that these other religions are a providential preparation for Christianity ... In our dealings with these religions we must try to discover how, throughout their history, God has been leading them step by step towards the final revelation of himself in Christ.³²

Similarly, Bede continues to maintain the distinction between “natural religion” and Christianity; yet his presentation of this dichotomy appears to gain new nuances, “Eastern” religion now being described as “practically” revelatory:

We must realize that the tradition of the East embodies what is practically a revelation of God to mankind. It is derived from that primitive revelation of God in the order of nature, which was made in the beginning ... We have, therefore, not merely to impose a western[sic] religion on the people of the East, but to show them that their religion finds its fulfilment in Christ.³³

Christ in India also contains several statements to the effect that “contact with the eastern mind”³⁴ may enrich the work of Christian theologians. The study of Vedanta is identified as being particularly useful, as “[t]here is no treatise in Catholic theology which would not receive light from being studied in relation to the Vedanta.”³⁵

In this brief summary of what I consider to be the crucial elements in Bede’s description of non-Christian religions in his two earliest works, certain notions remain more or less fixed: (1) The separation between Christianity and “natural” religions; (2) non-Christian religions as “preparatory” for an eventual approach to Christianity; and (3) the understanding that non-Christian religions are potentially enriching for Christianity.

While Bede’s position on the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism will be modified, his understanding of Hinduism as a religion based on a mythological foundation will remain an important point throughout his writings. It remains outside the scope of this dissertation to discuss how far this conclusion of Bede’s is related to his view of Hinduism as a “natural” religion, yet it is still important to observe Bede’s notion that Hinduism is shaped by its mythological foundation, a topic which emerges for the first time in *Christ in India*:

It is the weakness of Hinduism that with all its depth of religious feeling and philosophical insight it is inextricably bound up with mythology. Indeed it would be true, I think, to say that Hinduism is based on mythology. The gods are symbols of the divine mystery, many of them profoundly significant, but they have no reality in themselves. Even Rama and Krishna, upon whom, above all, Hindu devotion rests, are not

³² Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 92.

³³ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 75.

³⁴ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 92.

³⁵ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 169.

properly historical figures. They are epic heroes who have become deified by the religious imagination of India.³⁶

For Bede this sets Hinduism apart from Christianity on a fundamental level. In a new introduction to *Christ in India* included in the 1984 edition, Bede himself emphasised the point that “[t]hese essays record the stages of my own discovery of Hinduism and my attempts to relate it to Christian monasticism and the theology of the Catholic Church.”³⁷ Nonetheless, this notion that Christianity is distinct from Hinduism since the latter is founded on a mythological basis remains is never discarded.

2.3. Bede’s Sources for the Study of Hinduism

At this point it may be useful to discuss the *sources* for Bede’s study of Hinduism. While his profound engagement with Indian religious traditions spans more than half of his lifetime, Bede’s primary sources in approaching these traditions were always *textual*—or, to be more precise: his sources were works written in European languages.³⁸ As mentioned above, Bede did study Sanskrit, but he personally admitted that his knowledge of the language remained limited. He also had some knowledge of Indian vernaculars, but even this was limited, and in his old age he no longer used Indian vernaculars at all.

Bede’s contact with leading representatives of Hindu traditions was quite limited during his first years in India, and remained so until the end of his life. He visited several holy places in India and even met with leading Hindu thinkers such as Swami Sivananda and Vinoba Bhave during a tour of India in the 1960’s, and maintained good rapport with the local Hindu community throughout his time at Shantivanam—however, such contact is hardly more than may be expected of a monk who chooses to move to India in order to “find the other half of his soul.” We will later return to a more detailed discussion of this point, which I consider to be important for an accurate understanding of Bede’s engagement with Hinduism.

Bede testified to feeling that he was better received abroad (particularly in the USA) than in India, and in *Christ In India* he expressed the difficulties experienced in the dialogue with Hindus, a dialogue he didn’t find to be fulfilling. While the particular reasons why Bede did not personally interact with leading Hindu theologians on a wider scale remain outside the scope of this dissertation, it is important to point out that direct contact with leading

³⁶ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 109-10.

³⁷ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 7.

³⁸ While Bede as far as I know never refers to works on Hinduism in other European languages than English, I have still chosen to use this broader category, as he sometimes refers to writings *translated* into English from other languages, such as French.

authorities from the various Hindu religious traditions were never formative for Bede's own understanding of Hinduism, even though he chose to live in a Hindu environment for decades.

Although his main sources for the study of Hinduism were written texts, Bede was certainly not only influenced by Western representations of Hinduism; he studied a great variety of Indian thinkers, and in his early writings on Hinduism he would often refer to the life and teachings of modern teachers such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharishi, Gandhi and Aurobindo. We will later see how Bede gradually came to be particularly inspired by the writings of Aurobindo, who was himself influenced by Shankara, yet sought to develop a new form of Vedanta; he is perhaps the only modern Hindu leader whose ideas are frequently elaborated on and approved of throughout Bede's writings. Trapnell describes Aurobindo as "[t]he Hindu philosopher with whom Griffiths exhibits the most affinity."³⁹

So far no literary biography on Bede has been published, and neither his biographers nor the two monographs published on Bede give any great space to his literary sources. This makes it difficult to trace influences on Bede not explicitly referred to in his writings with any certainty within the scope of a dissertation such as this. For our present purpose it will suffice to point out that Bede's study of Hinduism was primarily influenced by translations of classic texts as well as commentaries, studies and other works on the Hindu tradition.

Bede read widely within the field of religion, quoting and mentioning works written by Christian theologians as well as scholars working within the field of comparative religion as sources for his personal understanding of Hinduism. He repeatedly referred to the works of Mircea Eliade, in particular *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, a work which seems to be formative for Bede's presentation of mythology. A great number of the theologians and comparative religionists he quoted were fellow members of the Catholic Church, including R.C. Zaehner and the Jesuit father Pierre Johanns—to mention some of the authors quoted in *Christ in India*.

2.4. Shankara: Early Observations

In his very brief discussion on the nature and importance of non-Christian religions in *The Golden String*, Bede observed that "The idea of God which is found in Sankara, the great doctor of the Vedanta, is almost identical with that of St Thomas." Shankara continued to be a focal point in Bede's engagement with Vedanta throughout his writings. But while Bede refers with approval to ideas from Shankara's Vedantic system even in *Christ in India*, in this

³⁹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 94.

his second work he also separates Advaita Vedanta from Christianity on a fundamental level. In this regard Bede's presentation of and assessment of Advaita Vedanta as found in *Christ in India* stands out as quite different from what we find in his later works:

The difference lies in this. For the Hindu and the Buddhist, as for certain currents in islamic[sic] thought, in the ultimate state there is an absolute identity. Man realizes his identity with the absolute and realizes that this identity is eternal and unchangeable. In the christian[sic] view man remains distinct from God. He is a creature of God, and his being raised to a participation in the divine love is an act of God's grace, a gratuitous act of infinite love, by which God descends to man in order to raise him to share in his own life and knowledge and love. In this union man truly shares in the divine mode of knowledge, he knows himself in an identity with God, but he remains distinct in his being. It is an identity, or rather a communion, by knowledge and love, not an identity of being.

The differences between the two views cannot be denied. They are profound and far-reaching and affect the whole life of man.⁴⁰

While this is certainly a broad description of the metaphysics of "the Hindu and the Buddhist", it shows how Bede at this time distinguished sharply between some of the core *advaitic* notions and Catholic dogmatics, a point that is emphasised repeatedly:

In Advaita there is no place for any relation of any sort, the world and the soul are lost in God. This is where Hindu experience seems most clearly to go counter to christian[sic] experience. The relation of persons is transcended and since person necessarily implies relationship, this means that God is ultimately not a person at all.⁴¹

Man and the world are not lost in God, nor are the persons absorbed in the unity of the Godhead. It is these distinctions which christian[sic] orthodoxy is concerned to maintain, since they allow for relationship both between man and man in the mystical body of Christ, and between man and God. They leave a 'space' for the relation of love between persons, between the person of God and his creatures and between the persons within the Godhead."⁴²

We have to show the Hindu in the light of our faith, that in this ultimate experience of God, the absolute being, the world and the soul are not lost, nor is the personal being of God absorbed in the impersonal Godhead.⁴³

As will be clear from these excerpts, in *Christ in India* Bede stresses the *existential* difference between man and God, while accommodating for an experiential, or rather *relational* union between the two; the validity and relevance of various Hindu doctrines is evaluated from this perspective.

While *Christ in India* also contains praise of Shankara, the very notion of man's distinction from God is characterised as a hallmark of Christian doctrine, which separates it from Hindu non-dualism. In a section on "Semitic" and "Eastern" religions (exemplified by Hinduism and

⁴⁰ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 36.

⁴¹ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 203.

⁴² Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 205.

⁴³ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 173.

Buddhism), Bede stresses the “unique” revelation of a personal God found in Judaism and Christianity, which “gives a reality to nature and history”.⁴⁴ According to Bede’s understanding in *Christ in India*, this sets Christianity apart from Advaita Vedanta.

2.5. Bede’s Approach to Vedanta

As may be expected of any general presentation of Vedanta, Bede refers to what has come to be seen as the founding *acaryas* of the various Vedantic schools as his major points of reference—in particular Shankara and Ramanuja. The doctrines promulgated by these authorities are referred to by Bede throughout his works; they are often compared to or contrasted with doctrines from other Vedantic traditions, non-Vedantic Hindu traditions and even with notions found in other religious traditions, including Christianity.

It is important to note that Bede only very rarely refers to passages from the *Vedanta Sutra* or the works of later scholars within the various Vedantic schools. Indeed, it is even quite rare for him to mention such later representatives, or even the *Vedanta Sutra*, at all. In Bede’s writings Vedanta normally refers to a variety of distinct traditions that are based on ideas found in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The various Vedantic traditions are first of all evaluated based on the theology of the leading representatives of each particular tradition—that is, from the vantage point of Bede’s own understanding of, and interpretation of the beliefs expounded by the different Vedantic *acaryas*.

This is of course not to imply that Bede was not aware of other primary sources for the understanding of Vedanta, or of nuances within the Vedantic Schools. Nevertheless, he places the Vedantin “founding fathers” as sole reference points for his readers, and his own evaluation of Vedantic notions is based on the presentations he has made of the teachings of these *acaryas*.

In their article *The Swami from Oxford*, Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira object that

[t]he Hindu sources [Bede] usually speaks of are the very ancient Vedas, Upanishads, and Gita (all translated), or the very modern and westernized Hindu sources such as Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda, who usually write in English. He shows little familiarity with the vast majority of Hindu theologians of the intervening two millennia.⁴⁵

As will be clear from my survey of Bede’s writings, this observation is not entirely accurate, in that Bede continues to refer to the major Vedantic theologians (who date from

⁴⁴ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 32.

⁴⁵ Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, “The Swami from Oxford.” *Crisis* (March 1991): 22-25.
http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=3427 (last accessed 04-24-2007).

approximately the eight to the sixteenth century CE) throughout his oeuvre. Yet it remains true that Bede does not seek to treat Hinduism in its full historical and doctrinal complexity. Neither does he, for that matter, normally mention his textual sources, whether they are translations, modern-day Hindu commentaries or academic works.

During the period when the articles collected in *Christ in India* were first written—which coincides with the Second Vatican Council—Bede’s theology is still quite conventional, even though his engagement with the Hindu tradition is perhaps extraordinary for a Benedictine monk; basic aspects of Catholic dogma such as sin and redemption, a rather sharp distinction between the limited and fallen human being and a merciful and loving Trinitarian God that has revealed itself through the Incarnation all help to shape and determine Bede’s approach to Hinduism. From this vantage point it is important for Bede to point out that *advaita* is not the only tradition within Hinduism, even if it is better known in the West than many other Hindu traditions that may resonate more strongly with Christianity:

There are also the more realist doctrines in Hinduism of Dvaita (dualist) philosophy and of the Saiva Siddhanta which come nearer to the semitic conception. Thus both in the conception of God and in that of creation the way is open to a deeper understanding which could bring the semitic and oriental religions closer to each other.⁴⁶

Bede never doubted that Hinduism and Christianity share ideas that are apparently very similar, observing that “[w]e shall also find in Hinduism ideas of trinity, of incarnation, of salvation and grace, of sacrifice and sacrament.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, these similarities also pose serious difficulties for anyone wanting to compare the two:

The christian[sic] idea of trinity and incarnation, for instance, is profoundly different from the Hindu and we must never confuse them. But it is just this work of discrimination which is required of us, seeking to discover what is common to the two traditions and where the essential difference lies.⁴⁸

Pinpointing such an “essential difference” continues to be of importance in Bede’s writings after he moves to Shantivanam. Yet even at this earlier stage of his literary production he is ready to ask the challenging question: “But what of the point of view of other religions? Can they be expected to accept this role of being preparations, of having no finality?”⁴⁹ Bede concludes that this is only possible insofar as the Christian theologian can point out to the

⁴⁶ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 33.

⁴⁷ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 100.

⁴⁸ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 100.

⁴⁹ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 221.

non-Christian how the faith of the latter is deepened and fulfilled by Christianity, and that both Christianity and other religions are evolving traditions. The two may apparently share certain common elements, but Christianity is able to add depth to teachings that are not satisfactorily developed in other religions. Yet while Bede continues to maintain that Christianity can serve as a corrective to certain elements within Hinduism, the notion that Hinduism finds fulfilment in Christianity will shortly be re-worked in his later writings.

3. A Different Approach: *Vedanta and Christian Faith*

In 1968, the year Bede took up residence at Shantivanam, he gave a series of lectures at Madras University, later to be published under the title *Vedanta and Christian Faith* in 1973. *Vedanta and Christian Faith* marks a shift in Bede's attitudes not only towards Hinduism and Vedanta, but even towards religion in general. This shift occurs in the transformative climate following the Second Vatican Council, of which Bede was clearly enthusiastic. In a new introduction written for the 1979 edition of *The Golden String*, he stated that the Council's perspectives on "the Biblical, the Liturgical and the Ecumenical movements ... has carried these movements further than I would ever have expected."⁵⁰ For Bede,

[t]he most radical change which has taken place has been in the understanding of the temporal and historical character of the Bible and the Church. The Bible, instead of being regarded as a fixed and final revelation of God to man, is seen as a historic process in which the Word of God is being revealed under changing historical conditions, shaped by the historical, psychological and cultural circumstances of a particular people ... in the same way the dogmas of the Christian faith can no longer be regarded as fixed and final statements of Christian faith, but as expressions of Christian faith.⁵¹

Furthermore the Council's description of the nature of the Church, which implied a positive outlook on the world religions, is strongly reflected in Bede's theology. As stated in *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church), "many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside [the Catholic Church's] visible confines."⁵² It is within this post-Conciliary paradigm, where "[t]he Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions"⁵³, that Bede's later theological writings are formulated.

Before proceeding to study how such changes in Bede's outlook as a theologian are reflected his new perspectives on Hinduism, it may be useful to discuss Bede's position as a theologian.

3.1. Bede Griffiths: Catholic Theologian

Arriving at the Benedictine monastery at Prinknash in 1932 without any previous theological education, Bede received his entire theological formation as a Benedictine monk within the Catholic Church in Britain from the 1930's onwards. He soon came to gain an admiration for the scholastic system formulated by Thomas Aquinas that was far more profound than what

⁵⁰ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 3.

⁵¹ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, 3-4.

⁵² *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, n.8, quoted in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 426.

may be expected of any student of Catholic theology at the time, referring to Aquinas' teachings on many different issues as normative throughout most of his own writings. Aquinas' insistence of God's absolute transcendence, man's participation in the divine nature as well as his extensive use of negative categories as appropriate for describing God resonate strongly with Bede's own theology. The fact that Aquinas was clearly influenced by a variety of non-Christian teachings (whether of Muslim, Jewish or Aristotelian origin) may in a certain sense seem to parallel Bede's own sympathies, insofar as his theology was inspired by sources such as British romanticism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Among the contemporary Catholic theologians that Bede refers to most often (and most approvingly) in the years after moving to Shantivanam were the Thomists Jacques and Raïssa Maritain and Karl Rahner. As we shall see, Rahner's notions that man is by nature disposed to search for God, and that God's revelation through Christ surpasses man's own religious pursuit, resonate with developments in Bede's theological project—as did the ideas of symbolism presented not only by Rahner but in particular by the Maritains, whose understanding according to Shirley du Boulay “coincided precisely with his own. The Maritains contended that the symbol is a catalyst to the experience of a mystery that goes beyond understanding, that it can lead to the depth of the experience which it expresses.”⁵⁴

Another major source of inspiration was Teilhard de Chardin, whose influence will be discussed in the context of Bede's later writings. The inspiration drawn from these theologians help to identify Bede as a modern theologian within the Church. In the words of Trapnell, “[Bede] clearly identified himself with progressive elements within the Roman Catholic Church, those who were attempting to respond boldly to the calls for change voiced at Vatican II.”⁵⁵

3.2. Bede's Precursors in the Hindu-Christian Dialogue

As we have seen, Bede had already pointed out how Christian theology may be enriched by a serious study of Vedanta even before he moved to Shantivanam. On the very first page of *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, this position is reiterated when Bede indicates that the Hindu

⁵³ *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, n.2, cited in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 400.

⁵⁴ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 140.

⁵⁵ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 196.

and Christian systems of theology “may well be considered to be the most profound penetration into the ultimate nature of reality which the world has seen.”⁵⁶

Hinduism, then, is set apart from the other world religions as particularly significant. In his later works, especially *A New Vision of Reality*, Bede will emphasise how modern man may benefit from studying *all* the world religions, including African and Australian tribal religions. Yet even if Bede at times deals with ideas from traditions such as Mahayana Buddhism and Islamic Sufism in detail, the topic of Hinduism remains a focal point throughout his writings, and the various systems of Vedanta are always awarded particular attention.

As pointed out by John Brockington in *Hinduism and Christianity*, interaction—and indeed dialogue—between Catholics and Hindus dates back to the Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili’s attempts to convert Tamil Brahmins to Christianity in the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ Several other precursors to Bede’s attempts at Hindu-Christian dialogue by means of appropriating elements from Hindu beliefs and practices may also be noted, including the Bengali convert Brahmabadhab Upadhyay in the nineteenth century, as well as the founders of Shantivanam, Henri le Saux and Jules Monchanin. Trapnell identifies acceptance of the insignias of *samnyasa* as a common factor shared by all the figures just mentioned,⁵⁸ and furthermore claims that not only can Bede be seen as continuing the work of these pioneers, but that “[h]e is part of a corporate effort, which in historical terms has just begun; it is a task that will consume centuries.”⁵⁹

Of these precursors Bede only rarely referred to others than Henri le Saux, perhaps more commonly known under the name of Swami Abhishiktananda, as used by Bede. Teasdale claims that the teachings of le Saux were formative for Bede’s understanding of *advaita*,⁶⁰ yet he also concludes that “Abhishiktananda went farther than any other Christian in his penetration and assimilation of the Hindu ascetical/mystical ideal.”⁶¹ Trapnell draws a similar conclusion, stating that “while Abhishiktananda [sic] “plunged” into the experience of *advaita* beyond all symbols with the abandon of radical faith, Griffiths always held onto the Jesus

⁵⁶ Bede Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith* (Clearlake, CA: The Dawn Horse Press, 1991), 100. Note that the second edition of *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, published by The Dawn Horse Press in 1991 also contains several texts by various other authors, as well as an additional lecture by Bede Griffiths edited by Wayne Teasdale.

⁵⁷ John Brockington, *Hinduism and Christianity*, 168-9.

⁵⁸ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 18.

⁵⁹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 76.

⁶⁰ Teasdale, *The Other Half of my Soul*, 13.

⁶¹ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 32-33.

Prayer as a connection to Christ and to the tradition.”⁶² They were both deeply inspired by the notion of *advaita*, and le Saux concurred with Bede that the Trinitarian doctrine (or rather, experience) completes the experience of *advaita*.⁶³

Despite the existence of such precursors, in *Vedanta Christian Faith* Bede states that “very little attempt has been made so far to compare the orthodox tradition of Hinduism with the orthodox tradition of Christianity.”⁶⁴ This emphasis on “orthodoxy” is a common ideal both for Bede and the various Catholic monastic figures just mentioned. Roberto de Nobili deemed it crucial to approach the Hindu Brahmins through a respectful attitude towards their culture, dressing and living as a *samnyasin*, studying the Upanishads and learning both Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil. His mission had quite limited impact; it was entirely directed towards members of the higher strata of Hindu society, which he hoped to approach through a deep understanding of Brahminic culture.

Similarly Jules Monchanin declared that “Advaita and praise of the Trinity are our only aim.”⁶⁵—a declaration which shows that the emphasis on Vedanta as the most important element within Hinduism (that is, from the perspective of Catholicism) was certainly not an invention of Bede’s. Thus Bede may be identified as continuing the attempt at approaching Hinduism by means of studying Vedanta, as pointed out by Teasdale.⁶⁶

3.3. Hindu and Christian Orthodoxy

Bede regrets that “[m]ost commonly it has been the unorthodox in each religion who have felt the attraction of the other, and who have attempted to combine elements from each religion in a new synthesis.”⁶⁷ Hindu and Christian orthodoxy is defined as follows: “By the orthodox tradition of Hinduism I mean the Vedanta and by the orthodox tradition of Christianity I mean the theological tradition.”⁶⁸

For Bede, Vedanta refers to “various systems of philosophy” based on an ideology which “was first developed in the Upanishads ... and the tradition has grown up over the succeeding centuries, being enriched by many currents from different sources, above all the current of *bhakti*, or devotion to a personal God, which gave us the Bhagavad Gita.”⁶⁹ Vedanta, then, is

⁶² Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 180.

⁶³ Teasdale, “Dom Bede Griffiths”, xi.

⁶⁴ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 100.

⁶⁵ This famous quote from a letter by Monchanin is found in Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 32.

⁶⁶ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 75-6.

⁶⁷ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 100.

⁶⁸ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 101.

⁶⁹ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 101.

said to refer to several distinct yet interrelated traditions, but primarily Shankara's *advaita*, Ramanuja's *vishishtadvaita* and Madhva's *dvaita*.

Here it may be pointed out that Bede also sometimes refers to ideas from Shaiva Siddhanta and Kashmiri Shaivism as similar to, and supplementary to ideas found both in Christian theology and the three schools of Vedanta just mentioned. Kashmiri Shaivism was particularly appealing to Bede, as it combined non-dualism with a positive appraisal of creation. Similarly, he sometimes refers to the theological systems of Nimbarka, Caitanya and Vallabha. However, these Vedantic systems are only given cursory treatment, never receiving the in-depth analysis given to the three major schools of Vedanta.

Interestingly, in his study of the *Bhagavad Gita* (to which we shall return repeatedly), Bede enthusiastically refers to ideas found in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* as similar both to those of the *Bhagavad Gita* and Christian theology. In *The Marriage of East and West* Bede also identified Shaivite influences on the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*⁷⁰—yet nevertheless, while elaborating on theistic currents within Hinduism, Bede focuses almost entirely on Vaishnavism without ever comparing it to Shaivism at any length. In *The Marriage of East and West* Bede identifies both Krishna and Shiva as loving deities, but Shiva is “essentially a cosmic figure”, unlike Krishna, who “seems to have had a basis in history.”⁷¹ Indeed, the tenets of Shaivism are rarely discussed in Bede's presentation of Hinduism, except for the brief references to the doctrines of Shaiva Siddhanta and Kashmiri Shaivism.

3.4. The Three Major Schools of Vedanta

In order to compare Vedanta and Christianity Bede outlined three main topics for his exposition in *Vedanta and Christian Faith*: (1) God's nature; (2) creation, man and their relation to God; and (3) the ultimate state of man and creation. On these topics Bede compares ideas found in the Vedantic systems with Catholic dogmatic theology, the goal being to “place the Christian experience of the divine consciousness beside that of the great doctors of the Vedanta and compare them with one another.”⁷²

In the presentation of the teachings of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva found in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* Bede is intent on giving concise but detailed descriptions of their respective theological systems. Each tradition is initially discussed separately, before being compared to Christian theology as well as the other systems of Vedanta.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 81.

⁷¹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 86

⁷² Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 119.

In his assessment of Ramanuja's theology, Bede finds the notions of divine mercy, the fall of man and the possibility of human participation in the divine nature as highly appealing to the Christian: "Indeed, it is impossible to doubt that Ramanuja was truly the recipient of divine grace, which enabled him thus to penetrate into the mystery of the Person of God, of grace and of salvation."⁷³ On the other hand, Bede finds Ramanuja's notion of man and creation as being extensions of God to somehow impose limits on God's nature.

In this regard Bede gives preference to the theology of Madhva, who draws a clear distinction between man, nature and God. While he does not elaborate on the five distinctions between God, man and nature identified in the Dvaita system, the idea of a distinction between God and man is presented as important from a Christian perspective. Yet Madhva's emphasis on an absolute and final distinction between man and God is presented as problematic for the Christian, as man's participation in the divine nature is described by Bede as being limited in Madhva's dualism.

Shankara's *advaita* is highly praised by Bede due to his sharp distinction between the absolute Brahman on the one hand and man and creation (which are limited) on the other, as well as for allowing for man's identification with *brahman*. Yet Shankara's notion that the final state of man and his relation to God is a union which is devoid of distinction is seen as incompatible with Christian teachings on the individual existence of man as well as the Trinitarian doctrine.

Quite early in *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, Bede acknowledges that "The conception of God, which was formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, is in my opinion the most adequate which the human mind has been able to achieve."⁷⁴ His dependence on Thomism is to some extent evident in his evaluation of the Vedantic systems. Bede presents Christian theology as drawing a clear distinction Between God and man (a notion perceived by Bede as being somewhat contrary to Ramanuja and somewhat in accordance with Madhva and Shankara); yet also as allowing for man's participation in God's nature (perceived to be somewhat contrary to Madhva and somewhat in accordance with Ramanuja and Shankara); as identifying love as a crucial aspect of God's nature (perceived to be somewhat contrary to Shankara, somewhat in agreement with Madhva and Ramanuja); and finally as identifying the universe as distinct from God (somewhat in agreement with Madhva and Shankara, but somewhat against Ramanuja).

⁷³ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 131.

⁷⁴ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 103.

Bede's survey of the Vedantic schools leads him to conclude that "[e]ach system of the Vedanta, as we have seen, has its own profound conception of God and his relation to the universe, but none of them is precisely that of Christian faith."⁷⁵ While this should perhaps come as no surprise, it is interesting to note that in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* Bede engages with the Vedantic systems as potentially parallel to the Christian faith on very important issues. His presentation of the various schools of Vedanta (wherein Christian theology is placed as one of several theological systems) is a comparative study. Nevertheless, while the various systems appear to be considered from the same vantage point, Christian doctrine (as formulated by St Thomas and as promulgated by the doctrinal ministry of the Catholic Church) is the normative standard by which the tenets of the other systems (as formulated by the *acaryas* or formative teachers of each Vedantic system) are measured.

3.5. The Importance of Shankara

While Bede identified several important points of disagreement between Catholic Christianity and all of the various systems of Vedanta, Shankara's *advaita* nevertheless received particular attention. The most important aspect of the critique raised against Shankara in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* is that he does not hold the creation to be real and valid; but when compared to Ramanuja's system, Advaita Vedanta is of greater value for Bede both in regards to its presentation of God and creation, for

[i]f the world is a mode of Divine Being, then we have to say that in some sense the world is God. Thus, although Ramanuja's conception of God is so attractive to a Christian at first sight, here is a sense in which the *nirguna Brahman*, the absolutely unqualified, non-dual Being of Sankara, is nearer to the Christian conception of God than the "qualified" being of Ramanuja.⁷⁶

However, the main appeal in Shankara's system is the very notion of *advaita*, which Bede continues to admire throughout his later writings. In *Vedanta and Christian Faith* he asks, "[w]hat then is the relation between Hinduism and Christianity on this most vital question of the avaitic experience? How can this most profound of all the insights of Hinduism be related to Christian doctrine?"⁷⁷ For Bede the Vedantic controversy over *advaita* is a "most vital question", and *advaita* itself is not only the "most profound insight" of Vedanta, but of Hinduism as a whole. Bede substantiates his conclusion in this matter by reference to the theology of Aquinas:

⁷⁵ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 132.

⁷⁶ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 131.

⁷⁷ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 150.

St. Thomas, then, is in agreement with Sankara that the Divine Nature is absolutely simple, “without duality,” and that the divine mind, which is simply the consciousness of being, knows all things in an absolute identity with itself. There can be no doubt that Sankara and Aquinas have together reached the most fundamental understanding of the ultimate nature of being and consciousness.⁷⁸

This conclusion drawn by Bede may seem unequivocal and final, especially as the positions of St Thomas and Shankara are portrayed as identical on this issue of non-duality. But Bede also notes how non-duality is in certain important regards at odds with some of the essential dogmas of his Christian faith, since Shankara’s system “demands that we admit the ultimate unreality of all distinct forms of being, not only of the external world, but of the human consciousness and of a personal God.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, “it remains true that for Sankara the *Brahman* is without relationship of any sort, and therefore, it must be supposed, without love.”⁸⁰ As we have seen, this denial of personal existence (whether of the Trinity or man) as well as the absence of a dynamism of love in Advaita Vedanta contrasts with Ramanuja’s position as it is presented by Bede. Even though this is the case, Bede gives preference to the system of Shankara with its emphasis on non-duality, wherein man is still granted a participatory role in the Divine:

Thus we find that Christian doctrine holds with Sankara that the ultimate end of man is to “participate in the Divine Nature,” to share in God’s own mode of consciousness, and hence to know himself and all things in their identity in the divine essence ... We are justified therefore in saying that there is a Christian tradition of the ultimate state of man and the universe which is identical with that of Sankara.⁸¹

Adding nuances to his position, Bede asserts that “A Christian will never say that the soul is of the same essence as God.”⁸² Yet in the concluding paragraphs of *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, worth quoting at some length, Bede gives a clear appraisal of Shankara’s *advaita* as preferential to the other Vedantic systems:

A Christian cannot but feel a deep sympathy with the different systems of Vaishnavite faith with their wonderful conception of infinite, eternal, and transcendent Being, who is yet a personal God, free from every taint of sin and imperfection, who seeks to deliver man from sin and to communicate to him his own grace and love. But if the Vaishnavite faith has much to attract us, it is yet to Shankara that we must turn for the most profound conception of the ultimate state of man and the universe. For when we say that man will share in the divine mode of being and consciousness, we mean that man will share in the “non-dual” Being and Consciousness of God. ... All things will then be reunited in God, wholly penetrated by the light of God, forming a single image of God.

⁷⁸ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 150-51.

⁷⁹ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 151.

⁸⁰ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 126.

⁸¹ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 151.

⁸² Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 160.

But this means that all differences, as we know them, will disappear. Here we begin to see the full significance of Sankara's *advaita*. In God all differences which appear in nature and all distinctions known to the human mind are transcended.⁸³

While this does not necessarily amount to unqualified support for Shankara's *advaita*, the notions from Shankara's system that are described by Bede to resemble or even parallel Christian doctrines are identified as more relevant for his theology than notions found in the *Vaishnava* schools, which are also said to substantiate and parallel Christian doctrine in some regards. We will return to Bede's preferential treatment of certain Vedantic systems in the following chapters.

3.6. The Danger of Syncretism

In *Christ in India* Bede warned against syncretism in quite unequivocal terms:

The danger in the encounter with Hinduism is always that of a superficial syncretism, which would regard all religions as 'essentially' the same, and only differing in their 'accidental' characteristics. Needless to say, this is destructive of all serious dialogue and makes real understanding impossible. ... What is required is a meeting of the different religious traditions at the deepest level of their experience of God. ... It is at this level that Christian and Hindu have to meet, to discount in their experience of God, what is really common and where the real differences arise.⁸⁴

In *Vedanta and Christian Faith* Bede does indeed account for many such differences in a way that does not seem to compromise with the teachings of the Vedantic *acaryas*. Nevertheless he insists on the common ground between Advaita Vedanta and Christianity in the concluding paragraphs of *Vedanta and Christian Faith*:

We must pass into that world of non-duality, in which our present mode of consciousness is transcended. ... In this view of the ultimate mystery of Being, which is the beginning and the end of all our human aspiration, Hindu and Christian unite not only with one another but also with the Buddhist and the Muslim.

There is a final transcendent state of Being and Consciousness, in which alone perfect bliss is to be found, to which every great religion bears witness. This state transcends all concepts of the mind and images of the sense, and is known only when the Divine Being chooses to reveal himself to man. ... May our study of different traditions of religion lead us all to a deeper understanding of this Divine Mystery and to share in a greater measure of this Divine Bliss!⁸⁵

Thus in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* Bede is able to speak of a single, final state that all religions bear witness to, a position which seems contrary to ideas found in his earlier works. Christianity is now in one to some extent put on an equal level with other religious traditions, as it is but one of several systems that all witness to a single and unified, transcendent state.

⁸³ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 162.

⁸⁴ Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 46-7.

⁸⁵ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 162-3.

This notion is fundamental for the conclusions presented in Bede's next book, *Return to the Centre*.

4. The Eternal Religion: *Return to the Centre*

Return to the Centre was first published in 1976, but appears to have been written several years earlier. In one of his last recorded interviews, Bede stated that “[w]hen I came to Shantivanam, I began to write *Return to The Centre* spontaneously.”⁸⁶ Judson Trapnell dates *Return to the Centre* as having been written slightly later, in 1972.⁸⁷ The theme of the book is the similarities between the world religions, as well as the call for modern man to return to a religious approach to life.

4.1. Religion Reconsidered

Admitting to transformative changes in his own spiritual life, in the introduction Bede includes an autobiographical observation: “Let me now try to reflect on what India has done to me, on how my mind has developed over these years, on the changes which have taken place in my way of life and in the depths of my soul.”⁸⁸ One such far-reaching change is Bede’s new understanding of religion. Asking “[w]hat is the reason that modern society has lost [the] principle of integration?”⁸⁹ Bede goes on to answer that

[i]n the Middle Ages ... not only in Europe, but also in China and India and the Islamic world, a creative synthesis was achieved, in which the physical and psychic and spiritual worlds were marvellously integrated ... the principle of integration was preserved in the ‘perennial philosophy’, the traditional wisdom, whether Confucian or Buddhist or Hindu or Islamic or Christian.⁹⁰

As alluded to by the very title of this work, *Return to the Centre*, Bede is of the opinion that modern man must now return to a more holistic approach to life in order to achieve a fulfilling and meaningful existence. But even though this change implies a “return,” today such a return may only be achieved by means of a novel approach:

The only way in which the world can recover is by a return to the eternal religion, the divine law on which human society is based. But this eternal religion cannot be discovered now exclusively in any one religion. We cannot return to the past forms of Catholicism or Buddhism or Confucianism or Hindu or Islamic orthodoxy. Each religion has to return to its source in the eternal religion, freeing itself from the limitations which historical circumstances have imposed upon it...⁹¹

⁸⁶ Bede Griffiths Quoted in John Swindells, *A Human Search: Bede Griffiths Reflects on His Life. An Oral History* (Liguori, Mo: Liguori Publications, 1997), 127.

⁸⁷ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 129.

⁸⁸ Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1976), 9.

⁸⁹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 95.

⁹⁰ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 95-96.

⁹¹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 97.

Accordingly Bede draws a distinction between the religious traditions (as conventional, structured systems of belief) and their origins or sources, which must be the goal of modern man's search:

Where, then, is this eternal religion – the *Sanatana dharma*, as the Hindus call it – to be found? It is to be found in every religion as its ground or source, but it is beyond all formulation. It is the reality behind all rites, the truth behind all dogmas, the justice behind all laws. But it is also to be found in the heart of every man.⁹²

It is perhaps symptomatic of this new understanding that Bede refers to a Hindu term as synonymous with the term “eternal religion.” Of course, a distinction between the source of Christian faith (the mystery of the Trinity, as revealed through Christ) and dogma is acceptable to Catholic theology. However, as we may surmise from the passages quoted above Bede goes further than this, identifying the distinction between religious dogma and the ultimate mystery as a distinction common both to Christianity and other religions. From this perspective Catholic dogmatic theology is but one of many theological systems, and as such it is not of unique value in itself. In one sense Christian theology is reduced to the position of being but one of several systems of belief, all of which are but signs or symbols of the “eternal religion”. Furthermore, this eternal religion is also accessible to all men as an inner reality, “to be found in the heart”.

In a discussion on Bede's orthodoxy as a Catholic theologian in the conclusion of his monograph on Bede, Judson Trapnell states that

his emphasis upon the symbolic nature of liturgy, theology, and doctrine, while firmly grounded in these authorities [i.e., Patristic sources, Aquinas, the Maritains, Dulles and Rahner], had controversial implications, especially when applied to an interreligious context—implications that he was more daring than his authorities in explicating.⁹³

While it falls without the scope of this thesis to assess whether Bede's understanding of theology as symbolic is in accordance with Catholic dogma, it is worth mentioning that in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* he had identified (and tried to compare) “orthodox” elements in Hinduism and Christianity, and that he emphasised the importance of such orthodoxy. To the extent that Bede may be said to go beyond the parameters of Catholic orthodoxy, then, this may be said to affect the fundament of his theological project, as defined by Bede himself,

⁹² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 98.

⁹³ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 196.

who always continued to consider himself as loyal to the Church—a point we will return to below.

Even though Bede readily acknowledged the need for structured and lucid systems of religious thought, “in all these systems the danger is that the logical structure and rational doctrine will obscure the mystical vision, so inherent is the tendency of the rational mind to seek to dominate the truth which it should serve.”⁹⁴ Based on this understanding, theology as a structured system of religious belief formulated by theologians with the backing of the Church is described as secondary to authentic religious experience.

Bede’s insistence on spiritual experience as necessary for gaining a deeper understanding of religion is strengthened when he states that “[t]his hidden source can only be found by those who follow the path of the traditional wisdom. In every religion there is a tradition of faith, in which the truth of the revelation is preserved.”⁹⁵ While this should not be understood as supportive of any particular school of mysticism, or one particular mystical approach (or any other specific form of spirituality, for that matter), Bede’s statement implies distinguishing between different layers that are said to exist *within* the religious systems.

Man’s goal, then, is to search for the “eternal religion”, the “perennial philosophy” or the “hidden source” which points beyond religious doctrine. The goal is to reach a direct, experiential understanding: “All external religion, with its rites and dogmas and organisation, exists for no other reason but to lead men to the knowledge – which is also the experience – of this inner mystery.”⁹⁶ This mystery is otherwise occluded, or rather conditioned, by what may be called “external” circumstances:

All scriptures and traditions are historically conditioned; they belong to a particular age and culture and are expressed in a particular language and mode of thought. But beyond these historic forms of expression lies the original Mystery, the revealed Truth.⁹⁷

4.2. Religion as Symbol

From this perspective, Bede asserts that “Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism, and the different schools of Vedanta within Hinduism”, as well as the other world religions and the various Christian denominations,

⁹⁴ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 105.

⁹⁵ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 106-07.

⁹⁶ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 108.

⁹⁷ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 106.

all are different expressions of the one Truth of revelation, each with its particular insight. But one must learn to discern among these conflicting and partial views the principle which unites them, which transcends their differences and reconciles their conflicts.⁹⁸

Indeed, “it is not possible to confine the Spirit to one scripture alone.”⁹⁹ Statements to this effect can be found in most, if not all, of Bede’s later writings.

These bold statements, which reflect a new understanding and appreciation not only of Christianity and Hinduism, but of religion itself, is in turn reflected in Bede’s theology on several different levels. Christianity and Hinduism are no longer approached from a conventional theological perspective, since their dogmas are first of all important as *signs* of a reality that in a sense goes beyond what can be comprehended by language and reason. Furthermore Bede now relates the various religious systems to one another as equal in the sense that they are all signs pointing to something beyond; as such none of them fully encapsulate the ultimate reality—nor are their descriptions of it final.

This in turn makes it possible for Bede to engage in a comparative study of religious systems in a manner which differs from his previous attempts, insofar as the comparison is not just one of dogmas. If all religious language is symbolic, it is possible to compare these symbols with one another. For while Bede acknowledges that all religious traditions are “expressions of the one Truth of revelation”, he also adds that “each revelation has its own perspective, each has its own unique insight into the eternal mystery, and has to be judged in its own historical context and its own particular mode of thought.”¹⁰⁰

4.3. Shankara: New Perspectives

Based on his new approach to religion, in *Return to the Centre* Bede continues to make use of Aquinas and Shankara as points of reference when comparing Christianity to Vedanta. Bede’s aim in this book is not to deal specifically with particular points that may unify or distinguish Vedanta from Christianity in such detail as in *Vedanta and Christian Faith*. Non-duality and its possible implications, however, continue to be a major point of interest in *Return to the Centre*:

Aquinas and Shankara are here agreed. In God, the absolute Being, there is no division, or ‘composition’ of any kind. He is ‘without duality’ and sees and knows all things in himself as they exist eternally in identity with him. Everything – and every person – exists eternally in God as God. This is the truth of *advaita*, a truth as Catholic as it is Hindu.

⁹⁸ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 107.

⁹⁹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 106.

¹⁰⁰ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 86.

If there is ever to be a meeting of the religious traditions of the world, it can only be on this basis.¹⁰¹

This passage may be regarded as objectionable from a Christian as well as a Vedantic perspective. As we shall see below Bede's theology is distinctly Trinitarian in its outlook, yet the above statement does not accommodate for personality, dynamism or love within "the absolute Being"—at least not without at the same time compromising the *advaitin* notion of *brahman* as being completely and unequivocally devoid of distinctions. It may further be asked if this is a position that Aquinas would have acknowledged, as Bede would have him do. For while it may be said that the ultimate reality is described as unified and devoid of divisions within Advaita Vedanta, the same may of course only be said to be one *aspect* of the theology of Aquinas—or indeed of Church dogma—and not fully representative of the Catholic understanding of God as such.

Bede makes ample concessions to the existence of a personal aspect of God in *Return to the Centre*. Based on the Vedantic dichotomy between *nirguna* and *saguna*, for example, "we can say that *nirguna* Brahman corresponds with the Father in Christian theology—the ultimate ground of the Godhead—while *saguna* Brahman corresponds with the Son, the Word of God, the manifestation of the hidden Godhead."¹⁰² Of course such an interpretation of the *nirguna/saguna* dichotomy does not correspond to the one made within the Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita or other non-advaitin schools of Vedanta where the ultimate truth, the source of all that is, is described as ultimately personal.

Bede's interpretations of these terms may seem satisfactory or valid from an *advaitin* perspective, since he draws a distinction between the Father as the origin of the Son, but then of course from an *advaitin* perspective the category *saguna* refers to something which is less than *nirguna*: to a composite reality that is ultimately transient. Of course such a position would be difficult to maintain for an orthodox Christian theologian, for while the Son is said to proceed from the Father, this does not make him less divine.

To some degree Bede resolves this dilemma. Based on his understanding of Christian theology as a descriptive, symbolic system of belief as formulated in *Return to the Centre*, Bede elaborates on his Christology as follows:

¹⁰¹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 24.

¹⁰² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 122.

In Jesus of Nazareth that Word became flesh, manifesting the Father in a human form, communicating the Spirit to his disciples. But that human form is conditioned by space and time. It came into existence at a particular time, at a particular place.¹⁰³

4.4. Christ and Krishna

For Bede, the historical nature of Christian revelation sets it apart not only from Hinduism, but from all the world religions: “In Jesus myth and history meet.”¹⁰⁴ This point is elaborated on (or at least alluded to) in all of Bede’s works, and it is one of the hallmarks of Bede’s Christology, his theology and his perspective on religion in general.

Comparing Christ to Krishna, Bede admits that Krishna might have been a historical figure, yet he is “primarily a legendary character belonging to the world of myth”.¹⁰⁵ In the history of Krishna, “history is lost in legend, the human is swallowed up in the divine. What is more, he is morally ambivalent.”¹⁰⁶ This last comment may be taken to mean that Bede was not aware of, or did not acknowledge the symbolic value attributed to *Krishna-lila* in Vaishnava theology, and his statement would certainly not be acceptable for adherents of the Vedantic systems of Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha or Caitanya, wherein *Krishna-lila* is elaborated on so as to reflect a deep symbolic and mystical significance in what may appear as “morally ambivalent” at a cursory glance.

“Can one say that Krishna is God?”¹⁰⁷ asks Bede, concluding after describing Krishna’s role in the *Bhagavad Gita* that “It would be difficult to deny the name of God to such a being.”¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Bede’s presentation of Krishna as a mythological figure separates him from Christ in such a way that it is not possible to describe the two as God in the same manner: “The contrast with the love of Christ could not be more striking. The love of God was revealed in Christ not in poetry but in history. It was shown not in ecstasy but in self-giving for others, in the surrender of his life on the cross.”¹⁰⁹

While Christ is described a historic figure, the crucial part of the Christian revelation is that it connects myth and history: “At this point in history the veil is pierced, the Mystery shines through. At the resurrection of Jesus, human nature was taken up into the divine, time was

¹⁰³ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 58.

¹⁰⁴ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 78.

¹⁰⁵ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 83.

¹⁰⁶ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 76.

¹⁰⁷ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 85.

¹⁰⁸ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 85.

¹⁰⁹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 84.

taken up into eternity.”¹¹⁰ Jesus Christ is also devoid of “the lusts of Krishna or Shiva, or the violence and wrath of Yahweh.”¹¹¹

4.5. A Theology at Change

The primary issue of concern for Bede regarding the nature of the ultimate reality in *Return to the Centre* is the personal versus the impersonal categories used to describe the divine, as well as its relation with man, which despite Bede’s approval of Shankara’s *advaita* is a nuanced relationship rather than an impersonal union: “I discover my ground in the Word, my real Self which exists eternally in God and with God. Am I then God? No, I am a thought of God, a word of God.”¹¹² This distinction between man and God corresponds to a dynamism that exists even within God, since “to speak of a being who is knowledge and bliss is to imply a personal being, for a person is simply a conscious being, a being possessed of intelligence and will.”¹¹³

This is in not Bede’s final word on the subject, for “[t]o say that God is a Person is not necessarily to deny that he is impersonal.”¹¹⁴ The conclusion reached in *Return to the Centre* is that the most fitting description of God is *beyond* the dichotomy of a personal God versus an impersonal Godhead: “[T]his transcendent Being is more, not less, than personal, and therefore it is misleading to describe it as impersonal.”¹¹⁵ Bede’s method is to distinguish between personal and impersonal descriptions of God (reached via affirmation and negation respectively) on the one hand and transcendence on the other. Transcendence serves as a third category which goes beyond the dichotomy of personal and impersonal designations. “Brahman is Being in a transcendent sense, he is Being in a manner which transcends every mode of being which we can conceive.”¹¹⁶ This allows Bede to conclude that “[t]here is ... no conflict between the personal and the impersonal in the ultimate state.”¹¹⁷ But at the very end of his book, Bede returns to the categories of *nirguna* and *saguna* when describing man’s participation in the ultimate reality:

It is not God who remains but the Godhead, not ‘*saguna* Brahman’, God with attributes, related to man, but ‘*nirguna* Brahman’, God without attributes, the absolute Transcendence, the Abyss of the Godhead. We have returned to the Source, to the Ground of being, to the One ‘without a second’. Yet in this Ground, in this

¹¹⁰ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 73.

¹¹¹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 78.

¹¹² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 36.

¹¹³ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 141.

¹¹⁴ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 86.

¹¹⁵ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 142.

¹¹⁶ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 122.

¹¹⁷ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 121.

Source, everything is contained, everything is there, God and the soul, and the body and the universe, but in a manner beyond our conception, where all differences and distinctions, as we understand them, are transcended. This is the peace that passes understanding, the Nirvana of Brahman, the Emptiness, the Nothingness, where thought ceases and all is still. But in that stillness, in that silence, the Word is hidden, the Word in which everything exists eternally in the plenitude of being.¹¹⁸

Just a few sentences later, the book is ended with the following observation: “This is our destiny, to be one with God in a unity which transcends all distinctions, and yet in which each individual being is found in his integral wholeness.”¹¹⁹ While this description of the ultimate reality may seem to accommodate for *advaitin* and Buddhist categories such as “Emptiness” and “Nothingness”, Bede may also be said to sympathise with the theistic strains of Hinduism. This will become more evident in his next book, *The Cosmic Revelation*.

¹¹⁸ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 145.

¹¹⁹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 146.

5. *The Cosmic Revelation: Attempts at a Christian Vedanta*

Even though *The Cosmic Revelation* was published in 1983, a year after *The Marriage of East and West* (which we shall study in the next chapter), the book consists of lectures given several years earlier, during a visit to Conception Abbey in Missouri in 1979. The full title of the book, *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God*, helps to identify the dual theme of the book: Hinduism and what Bede conceives of as the “cosmic revelation.” At this stage in the development of his theology Bede writes freely on the “Vedic Revelation” without qualifying the term, for “we have to recognise today that God has revealed Himself in other ways than through the Bible.”¹²⁰

5.1. “Cosmic Religion” and its Limitations

In *The Cosmic Religion* Bede uses the three terms “cosmic revelation”, “cosmic religion” and “cosmic covenant” interchangeably to refer to the same religious phenomenon, which is that “God has been calling man from the beginning of time.”¹²¹ This terminology was used by Bede as early as in *Christ in India*, where he stated that “Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam all come under the cosmic revelation, the primeval Covenant of God with man.”¹²²

While terms such as these may be used to describe all non-Christian religions, Bede continues to refer to Hinduism as “the supreme example of a cosmic religion.”¹²³ The Hindu is said to have a strong sense of a divine presence that radiates throughout not only creation, but also human life: “The sacred character is always present in Hinduism. Every meal is sacred.”¹²⁴

This understanding of Hinduism is denounced by Gavin Flood, who on the contrary claims that “[t]here is nothing in Hinduism which is inherently sacred.”¹²⁵ According to Flood, such holiness depends on time and circumstances. Below we will discuss the validity of Bede’s claim that for Hindus, when *avatars* such as Krishna and Rama “lived is of no account whatsoever; they are manifestations of the eternal, not confined to any time or space.”¹²⁶ A similar critique may be raised in regards to Bede’s notions of Hindu religious practices.

¹²⁰ Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu Way to God* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1983), 7.

¹²¹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 27.

¹²² Griffiths, *Christ in India*, 196.

¹²³ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 35.

¹²⁴ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 39.

¹²⁵ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.

¹²⁶ Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 166.

Describing out how the process of desacralisation was well under way in India at the time when Bede arrived in 1950's, du Boulay points out how Bede may be criticised for "having an over-romantic attitude to India," and that "though Bede was often seeing the authentic sacred, he was sometimes seeing what he wanted to see, what he so badly needed to see."¹²⁷ Du Boulay furthermore claims that Bede never left the conviction that "India had a deep sense of the sacred which had been lost in the West."¹²⁸ We will later mention similar examples of notions held by Bede, which may possibly be further analysed and discussed from the perspective of Orientalism.

The ontological position of creation continues to be of great interest for Bede, and just like in his previous works he describes the positions of Aquinas and Shankara as similar, possibly even identical: "St Thomas Aquinas is clear about this: the world has a purely relative reality. That, I think, is what Sankara is trying to say. This world, you and I, are real, but with a completely relative reality."¹²⁹

Having approved of a strong presence of the sacred in Hinduism, Bede still deplores its otherworldly, non-historical and cyclical cosmology, which he perceives as flawed: "It is a wonderful search, but it leaves out the reality of this world."¹³⁰ Furthermore, "there is no sense of progress, no sense that you can get beyond these things, except in going beyond altogether to realise Brahman."¹³¹ In Bede's understanding these factors serve to hamper the development of Hinduism. A sense of being limited by myth is allegedly also felt by the Hindu: "The modern Hindu is trying to escape the negative aspect of myth, to realise more the value of history, of matter, of science, of progress."¹³² Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is identified as a proponent of this modernist current within Hinduism, but "opposition remains very strong. That, I think, is the negative aspect of Hinduism."¹³³

Even though Bede now allows for an allegorical reading of the stories describing Krishna,¹³⁴ he does not think that "one can find anywhere in Hinduism and Buddhism a comparable conception of the holiness of God which is essentially a moral holiness."¹³⁵ This, together with its cyclical understanding of history which hampers the possibility of growth, makes Christianity a corrective to Hinduism: "All things are under the providence of God and

¹²⁷ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 112.

¹²⁸ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 112.

¹²⁹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 72.

¹³⁰ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 118.

¹³¹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 119.

¹³² Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 119.

¹³³ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 119.

¹³⁴ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 116-17.

¹³⁵ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 122.

are leading to a final fulfillment. With the coming of Christ we encounter this finality.”¹³⁶ The term fulfilment is used again a few paragraphs later to describe what Christianity has to offer the Hindu:

“There is a finality in this. This seems to me to be the distinctive character of the Incarnation. It is God’s revelation, not in mythical time, not as a recurrence from age to age, but in historic time among a historic people, at a historic time and place, in which all things are to be fulfilled.”¹³⁷

At the same time Christianity can derive great benefits from certain aspects of Hinduism, especially its emphasis on eternity and the sanctity of nature. The two can mutually benefit one another: “Finally, what conclusion can we draw from this? The principle of complementarity.”¹³⁸

5.2. Theism in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*

In *The Cosmic Revelation* Bede’s presentation of Hinduism in general and Vedanta in particular is marked by a stronger appreciation for the theistic strands of Hindu thought than what is found in his previous works. For Bede the *Bhagavad Gita* is of particular interest in this regard: “What we have to discover is that experience of God which has its roots in the Vedas, which comes to light in the Upanishads and is given its fullest, most perfect expression in the Bhagavad-Gita.”¹³⁹ Bede identifies the Vedantic tradition’s emphasis on the Upanishads, *Vedanta Sutra* and *Bhagavad Gita* as “the Triple Foundation of Vedanta”.¹⁴⁰

Among the Upanishads the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* is of particular interest to Bede; it is “one of the most important ... called a theistic Upanishad, because it is centered on the concept of a personal God.”¹⁴¹ Speaking to what is presumably a predominantly Christian audience at Spencer Abbey, Missouri, in *The Cosmic Revelation* Bede acknowledges how “from our point of view it is the most important. It is called a Theistic Upanishad, and nowhere in the Upanishads is the doctrine of a personal God portrayed with such extraordinary power.”¹⁴² The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* is quoted to the effect that God can only be reached through grace. For Bede, then, its significance is paramount: “We could not have a clearer monotheism than this, and this is a peak point in Hinduism.”¹⁴³

¹³⁶ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 123.

¹³⁷ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 125.

¹³⁸ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 128.

¹³⁹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 17.

¹⁴⁰ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 70.

¹⁴¹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 47-48.

¹⁴² Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 81.

¹⁴³ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 83.

Similarly the theistic elements are identified as pivotal in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a work which “represents a new spirituality and is a decisive moment in the history of India and of Indian spirituality.”¹⁴⁴ The decisive moment is the development of “devotion to a personal God.”¹⁴⁵ Paraphrasing verse 9.4 of *Bhagavad Gita* as saying “All things depend on me, but I do not depend on them”¹⁴⁶, Bede asserts that this “is exactly the Christian doctrine.”¹⁴⁷

Having already concluded that “For Christians, God is essentially a person”,¹⁴⁸ Bede presents the common understanding of *advaita* among the higher strata of Hindu society as monistic: “For them, this world, human beings, and a personal God, are all appearances ... That is one interpretation of Sankara. It is only one school of Vedanta, and a particular interpretation of one school.”¹⁴⁹

This marks a new approach in Bede’s presentation of Shankara and Vedanta. Bede refers to the Catholic theologians Sara Grant and Richard de Smet as

able to affirm that the doctrine of Sankara is much more subtle. It is not pure monism at all. ... There is only one sun, one life, one truth, one reality, and it manifests itself in this, in that, in you and me. These are reflections of the one reality. This, I believe, comes very near to the Christian understanding.¹⁵⁰

5.3. A Catholic Interpretation of *advaita*

In *The Cosmic Revelation* Bede contrasts the supposedly monistic leanings held by many within the Hindu elite (based on their affinity for Advaita Vedanta), with a different interpretation of Shankara’s teachings as formulated by two fellow Catholic theologians working in India. Instead of challenging Shankara’s system as it is commonly understood by his adherents (that is, as a fundamentally monistic doctrine), Bede chooses to support an interpretation of the *advaitin* theologian’s system made by Catholic theologians. This willingness to accept a reinterpretation of *advaita* may be contrasted, for example, with Bede’s more straightforward rejection of Madhva, whose system is in many ways considered at face value, insofar as the conventional understanding of Madhva’s dualism seems to be accepted by Bede as the appropriate way to approach his system: “Now, many would think that Madhva’s idea of duality is nearest to Christian Doctrine, but in fact the God of Madhva

¹⁴⁴ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 87.

¹⁴⁵ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 87.

¹⁴⁶ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 103-04.

¹⁴⁷ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 104.

¹⁴⁸ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 69.

¹⁴⁹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 71.

¹⁵⁰ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 72.

is not really fully transcendent. There is duality but the world and souls are eternal; they do not depend for their existence on the creator.”¹⁵¹

Similarly, when describing the content of the Vedantic *mahavakyas* (which he refers to in several of his works), Bede calls for a re-evaluation of the common understanding of the meaning these allegedly hold for western readers:

These are the mysterious sayings which can so easily be misunderstood. ... *aham Brahmasmi*, ‘I am Brahman.’ Now most Europeans and Christians believe that means, “I am God,” and this sounds like blasphemy. They misunderstand the real meaning – because it is essentially a mystical meaning. In the same way, *Tat tvam asi*, ‘Thou art That,’ does not mean you are God. Again, there is the third *mahavakya*, *sarvam khalvidam Brahman asti*, ‘All this world is Brahman,’ and that, they say, is pantheism. Everything is God. That is taking these words literally and interpreting them in a rationalistic sense. But when we study the Upanishads deeply, we realize that they are seeking to express a mystical experience. What they are really saying is, ‘I, in the deepest centre, the ground of my being, am one with that Brahman, the source of all creation.’¹⁵²

With its strong emphasis on the value of the theistic currents within the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the call for a reinterpretation which favours a more theistically oriented interpretation of supposedly monistic tendencies in Hinduism (in particular the interpretation of ideas found in Shankara’s system), *The Cosmic Revelation* adds new nuances to Bede’s presentation of Vedanta. In *Return to the Centre* Bede referred to Aurobindo as “the greatest” among “those philosophers who under the influence of the West have recognised the values of matter and life, of history and personality”.¹⁵³ In *The Cosmic Revelation* the significance attributed to Aurobindo is emphasised further still. Bede considers him to be “the greatest philosopher of modern India, with the deepest insight into the ultimate nature of reality. For many years I studied him and I never forgot my debt to him.”¹⁵⁴ We will shortly see how Bede continues to refer to Aurobindo as an important corrective to what he perceives to be lacking not only in the monistic system of Advaita, but even within Vedanta in general.

While the Advaita system of Vedanta is given a broader, and sometimes more preferential treatment than the theistic systems of Vedanta in Bede’s writings, from *The Cosmic Revelation* onwards he also expresses the necessity of understanding notions from Advaita Vedanta in the light of the theistic currents found in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Upanishads—in particular the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*. But then in a passage at the very end of *The Cosmic Revelation* Bede again presents a more generalised understanding of Vedanta which is

¹⁵¹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 70.

¹⁵² Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 57.

¹⁵³ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 137.

contrasted with Christianity, which is said to serve as a corrective exactly because it stresses the value of individual existence—ideas Bede has previously identified as existent in Hinduism from the age of the *Upanishads*:

That is the goal of Hinduism – to reach that *sat-chit-ananda*, and that sat-chit-ananda [sic] is pure oneness, one without a second.

In the gospel there is a further depth revealed. In the ultimate reality there is revealed not merely an identity, but a communion. The final Christian Revelation is that the Godhead itself, the ultimate reality, is a communion of persons, a communion of persons in love, and that gives a further understanding of reality. The Hindu believes that God is love in a sense, and that you can love God but not that the Godhead itself is love. There cannot be love without two ... That is Christian *advaita*. We are one with another and one with Christ; we are one in this mystery of the Godhead, and I do not think we can go beyond that. This would be an example of how to relate the Cosmic Revelation to the Christian Revelation. We are all engaged in that task, and it is not something fully accomplished; it is that to which we are moving.¹⁵⁵

The “example of how to relate” Hinduism to Christianity, then, is to point out the emphasis of love and interrelatedness in Christianity as a corrective to the alleged lack of an understanding that “the Godhead itself is love” in Hinduism, which is said to present “pure oneness” as the ultimate goal of man.

How Bede can present this to be “the goal of Hinduism” is a question we shall return to below, where we shall see that his position on this issue is certainly modified, but never fully abandoned.

¹⁵⁴ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 114.

¹⁵⁵ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 130-31.

6. Unification: *The Marriage of East and West*

The Marriage of East and West is the last book written and edited by Bede in its entirety; his later works consist of lectures either edited by Bede himself or edited by others, and published with his approval.¹⁵⁶ In the introduction to the text Bede specifically relates *The Marriage of East and West* to what was perhaps his most famous publication so far, *The Golden String*. In his doctoral thesis, written before the publication of Bede's later works, Wayne Teasdale identified the book as "Bede's masterpiece."¹⁵⁷

6.1. Hinduism and Christianity: East and West

The Marriage of East and West reiterates many of the ideas found in Bede's previous works, and as suggested by the title the main theme is the meeting between Eastern and Western thought, illustrated through the allegory of a marriage. As noted by Trapnell, "marriage entails both oneness and twoness, unity and distinction."¹⁵⁸ Yet while Bede calls for the two to meet in marriage, his invitation for participants to take part in the interreligious dialogue is particularly directed towards Christians, who are called to re-evaluate their faith in the light of Eastern religions: "Then only will the 'marriage' take place in the Church as in the world between East and West."¹⁵⁹ This does not only tell us something about Bede's intended public, but also about his concepts of "East" and "West". While some attention is given to ideas found in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism, "East" and "West" are typified by Hinduism and Christianity respectively; in Bede's estimation these are worthy of particular attention, since "[t]he two most powerful myths in the world today are those of Hinduism and Christianity."¹⁶⁰

Hinduism and Christianity are presented as to some extent developing along opposite lines. While the Judaic-Christian tradition is said to have developed from an understanding of God as transcendent towards an understanding of God as immanent, the opposite development is said to have taken place in Hinduism (where this change of focus is said to have occurred in the Upanishads¹⁶¹). While mythological and mystical elements are identified in both traditions, the mythological aspect of Christianity is distinguished by Bede from other

¹⁵⁶ With the exception of the three anthologies of psalms and other religious writings published in the 1990's, which only contain brief introductions by Bede, as mentioned in the introduction.

¹⁵⁷ Wayne Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 9.

¹⁵⁸ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 99.

¹⁵⁹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 12.

¹⁶⁰ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 172.

¹⁶¹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 78.

religions by its markedly historical outlook¹⁶², as opposed to the Hindu faith, which “is the primordial religion, the universal, cosmic revelation, not tied to history in any way.”¹⁶³

However, the major divide between the two religious traditions as they are presented in *The Marriage Between East and West* is that they belong to two opposite mindsets, those of “East” and “West”:

People in the West are dominated by the conscious mind; they go about their business each shut up in his own ego. There is a kind of fixed determination in their mind, which makes their movements and gestures stiff and awkward, and they all tend to wear the same drab clothes. But in the East people live not from the conscious mind but from the unconscious, from the body not from the mind. As a result they have the natural spontaneous beauty of flowers and animals, and their dress is as varied and colourful as that of a flower-garden.¹⁶⁴

According to Bede’s understanding the Western mindset is said to be conscious and rational, and it needs to be balanced with the intuitive and subconscious mindset found in “the East”, especially within the Hindu tradition. Bede concludes that “[i]t is in the Upanishads that this intuition of ultimate reality has been most clearly expressed and where we can see it, springing, as it were, from its source.”¹⁶⁵ Intuition is defined as “a knowledge which derives not from observation and experiment or from concepts and reason but from the mind’s reflection on itself.”¹⁶⁶ Drawing a distinction between the “active” intellect and a “passive” intellect where impressions are stored, Bede elaborates that “[i]ntuition, then, is the knowledge of the passive intellect, the self-awareness which accompanies all action and all conscious, deliberate reflection.”¹⁶⁷

The dichotomy between “East” and “West” may also be traced in several of Bede’s later books, such as in *A New Vision of Reality*, where he states that whereas in “the Western tradition” the intellect is considered to be supreme, “In the Eastern tradition the intellect is really only the beginning”.¹⁶⁸ Even in one of his very last interviews, while he seems somewhat hesitant to describe “Eastern” man as living “from the unconscious”, Bede reiterates ideas similar to the ones from the above passage from *The Marriage of East and West*:

¹⁶² Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 175.

¹⁶³ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 177.

¹⁶⁴ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 8-9.

¹⁶⁵ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 68.

¹⁶⁶ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 153.

¹⁶⁷ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 156.

¹⁶⁸ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 180.

I was enchanted with it. I think I'd probably be less so now, but the whole oriental atmosphere – the women in saris, the men wearing turbans, and the natural spontaneous movements – is so fascinating. I used to say that people in the East live from the unconscious, while we Westerners live more from the conscious. Their movements are more spontaneous, like those of birds and animals; our movements are deliberate.¹⁶⁹

We will later discuss briefly how this dichotomy between “East” and “West” represents one of several literary strategies used by Bede, and how it may be approached from the perspective of Orientalism.

6.2. Common Roots: A Perennial Philosophy

We have already quoted Bede as referring to the “perennial philosophy” as an element which can be found in all the world religions in *Return to the Centre*.¹⁷⁰ In *The Marriage of East and West* the notions of “perennial philosophy”, “cosmic revelation” and “intuition/intuitive wisdom” are often used interchangeably when referring to features that are common to the world religions, including Christianity:

This is the vision of the ultimate reality which is given us in the perennial philosophy. It is common to Greece and to India, China and Arabia, and it is found in the Christian doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, where each creature participates through the indwelling presence of the Spirit.¹⁷¹

This common “vision” allegedly shared by the world religions does not consist in a unified presentation, description or definition of the divine mystery. Rather the vision shared can only be identified on a deeper level, that of actual religious experience, which defies and transcends description: “In each religion the divine Reality is manifested under different signs and symbols and we need to be able to discern this hidden truth in each religious tradition.”¹⁷² The common feature of all the world religion which is referred to under terms such as “cosmic religion” and “perennial philosophy” is a profound reverence for creation as well as an intuitive insight into a higher reality, which is particularly strong in Hinduism, where its roots can be traced back to the Vedas, the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*:

It is a doctrine of supreme wisdom, coming down from remote antiquity in the form of a divine revelation, expressed originally in myth and symbol, and developed through profound meditation, so as to give a unique insight into ultimate reality, that is, the ultimate nature of man and the universe.

Though it has come down to us through the Hindu tradition, it belongs not only to India but to all mankind. In fact, there is evidence that this tradition has been known from the earliest times. ... It has been called the Cosmic Revelation, the revelation of ultimate Truth, given to all mankind through the Cosmos, that

¹⁶⁹ Bede Griffiths quoted in Swindells, *A Human Search*, 69.

¹⁷⁰ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 95-96.

¹⁷¹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 100.

¹⁷² Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 33.

is, through the creation. Of this St Paul says: 'Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and divinity has been clearly perceived in the things that are made.'¹⁷³

While a more detailed survey of Bede's use of the "perennial philosophy" falls outside the scope of this dissertation¹⁷⁴, his use of this notion is relevant insofar as it is implied in his presentation of Hinduism and its relationship with Christianity. Du Boulay quotes Bede as referring to the notion of a perennial philosophy as "unacceptable to Catholics, though deserving serious study"¹⁷⁵ before he left Britain. Yet in the 1980's, according to du Boulay, Bede

frequently acknowledged his debt to Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*, recommending it to others as a book which opened people's eyes to the wisdom of the East, though he admitted that the book was rather immature, finding the most comprehensive exposition of the perennial philosophy in *Knowledge and the Sacred* by the Islamic theologian Seyyed Hussein Nasr.¹⁷⁶

Teasdale goes as far as concluding that "Bede's contemplative theology depends on the perennial philosophy and the notion of the intuitive faculty of the mind"¹⁷⁷, and that Bede furthermore perceived the "new" science (which we shall discuss below) as indicative of the veracity of the perennial philosophy.¹⁷⁸ In *A New Vision of Reality*, Bede will pinpoint how the notion of a perennial philosophy shows the common roots of Vedanta and Christianity:

Until the sixteenth century there was a universal philosophy not only in Europe but also throughout the civilised world. This is usually referred to in the West as "the perennial philosophy". It was found ... in India in the development of Vedanta; in the rest of Asia in Mahayana Buddhism ... and finally in Europe in the whole development of medieval Christianity. This universal wisdom, or perennial philosophy, prevailed from about AD 500 to about AD 1500 and is part of our inheritance.¹⁷⁹

A similar passage is also found in *The Marriage of East and West*, where Bede states that "the perennial philosophy ... is fully developed in Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, but is implicit in all ancient religion."¹⁸⁰ Summing up, for Bede the Hindu tradition is the paramount example of a "cosmic religion" embodying a "perennial philosophy", and that it is within this "cosmic" framework, a notion which Bede traces as existing in Christianity from the time of St Paul, that he seeks to understand Hinduism and compare it to Christianity. Yet while

¹⁷³ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 88. Bede quotes Romans 1:20.

¹⁷⁴ For more details on this issue, see Wayne Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 58-61.

¹⁷⁵ Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 116.

¹⁷⁶ Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 197.

¹⁷⁷ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 179.

¹⁷⁸ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 10-11.

¹⁸⁰ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 57.

Christianity is also said to contain such “cosmic” elements, as pointed out by Teasdale “Bede was able to assimilate the insights of the Asian traditions into his spiritual conception by distinguishing between cosmic and historical revelation.”¹⁸¹ Christianity is thus unique, since “In Jesus myth and history meet.”¹⁸²

6.3. Man, Scripture and the Value of Symbolism

For Bede, the understanding of religion as consisting in signs and symbols that point to something beyond language and the rational mind is a prerequisite necessary in order to gain a proper understanding of religious phenomena. Everything said about God is necessarily analogical by nature,¹⁸³ and the Bible is not strictly speaking the Word of God, but rather “the Word of God expressed through the words of men with the inevitable limitation of all human words.”¹⁸⁴ Finally:

“Today, more than ever, we are being called to recognize the limitations of every form of religion. Whether Christian or Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim, every religion is conditioned by time and place and circumstance. ... Idolatry consists in stopping at the sign; true religion is the passing through the sign to the Reality.”¹⁸⁵

It may be asked what position Christianity will retain within a theology based on these premises. We have seen Bede identifying Christianity as a pre-eminently historically oriented tradition, and in *The Marriage of East and West* he stresses the point that “in the Christian tradition each person, each thing, every event in space and time, has an infinite and eternal value.”¹⁸⁶ The value of individual existence and historical dimensions (as exemplified by the Christian emphasis on the historicity of Christ himself) makes Christianity an important correction to the Eastern traditions, where such an understanding is found to be lacking: “What is required surely is that we should see these two ‘revelations’ in relation to one another.”¹⁸⁷ Hindu myths lack historicity and finality, but at the same time “Hindu experience can also help to bring out another aspect of the godhead, the concept of God as Mother.”¹⁸⁸ To reconcile the cosmic and the Christian revelation is of paramount importance for Bede:

¹⁸¹ Wayne Teasdale, “Bede Griffiths as Visionary Guide,” 9.

¹⁸² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 78.

¹⁸³ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 101.

¹⁸⁴ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 102.

¹⁸⁵ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 149.

¹⁸⁶ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 178.

¹⁸⁷ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 180.

¹⁸⁸ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 191.

This, it seems to me, is the problem of the modern world; on this depends the union of East and West and the future of humanity. We must try to see the values in each of these revelations, to distinguish their differences and to discover their harmony, going beyond the differences in an experience of the 'non-duality', of transcendence of all dualities.¹⁸⁹

This strong emphasis on the importance of myth and religion correlates to Bede's anthropology; man is by nature an intuitive and imaginative creature, and if these aspects of human nature cannot be accommodated for by modern society, man will not be able to achieve a fulfilling life, as may be the case in the modern society with its emphasis on rationality:

Man cannot live without myth; reason cannot live without the imagination. It creates a desert, without and within. It becomes the sword of destruction, bringing death wherever it goes, dividing man from nature, the individual from society, woman from man, and man and woman from God. This is what the triumph of reason has done, and now we have to go back and recover the myth...¹⁹⁰

6.4. Hindu Terminology

In *The Cosmic Revelation* Bede identifies the terms *purusha* and *advaita* as being "key words in an Indian Christian Theology".¹⁹¹ In *The Marriage of East and West* he will analyse several key terms from the Vedantic tradition, several of which originate in the traditions of *ashtanga yoga* and *samkhya*, and which may be compared to possible Christian equivalents, or which may be of relevance for Christian theology in other ways.

Of particular importance for Bede is the term *saccidananda*, which in his usage serves to describe both a spiritual experience and the nature of the ultimate mystery. The experience of *saccidananda* is identified as one of the cornerstones of Hindu spirituality:

The Ultimate is experienced in the depth of the soul, in the substance or Centre of its consciousness, as its own Ground or Source, as its very being or Self (*Atman*). This experience of God is summed up in the word *saccidananda*. God, or Ultimate Reality[sic], is experienced as absolute being (*sat*), known in pure consciousness (*cit*), communicating absolute bliss (*ananda*). This was the experience of the seers of the Upanishads as it has been that of innumerable holy men in India ever since. It is an experience of self-transcendence, which gives an intuitive insight into Reality. It is this experience which Western man has to learn to acquire.¹⁹²

This unitive aspect of the experience of *saccidananda* is emphasised even more emphatically in a later passage, where the *advaitin* understanding of the term is emphasised further still:

¹⁸⁹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 177.

¹⁹⁰ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 171.

¹⁹¹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 76.

¹⁹² Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 27.

The mind, turning back on itself, knows itself intuitively. It is an experience in which being and knowing are one – that is why it is called *saccidananda*, because being (*sat*) is experienced in a pure act of knowing (*cit*) in the bliss (*ananda*) of oneness, of non-duality. The knower, the known and the act of knowing are all one.¹⁹³

While such an interpretation of *saccidananda* may represent the *advaitin* understanding of Brahman as entirely devoid of differentiation, it gives no concession to the theistic understanding of *saccidananda* as dynamical and interpersonal. This theistic understanding, however, is accommodated for when Bede interprets *saccidananda* as a term describing God's nature in a passage worth quoting in full:

In Hinduism the experience of God was expressed, as we have seen, in the terms of *Brahman*, *Atman*, and *Purusha*. Would it not be possible to interpret the experience of Jesus in the light of the Hindu understanding of ultimate reality? We could then speak of God as *Saccidananda* – Being, Knowledge, Bliss – and see in the Father, *sat*, Being, the absolute eternal 'I am', the ground of Being, the source of all. We could then speak of the Son, as the *cit*, the knowledge of the Father, the Self-consciousness of eternal Being, the presence to itself in pure consciousness of the infinite One; Being reflecting on itself, knowing itself, expressing itself in an eternal Word. We could then speak of the Father as *nirguna Brahman*, Brahman 'without attributes', the infinite abyss of being beyond word and thought. The Son would then be *Saguna Brahman*, Brahman 'with attributes', as Creator, Lord, Saviour, the Self-manifestation of the unmanifest God, the personal aspect of the Godhead, the *Purusha*. He is that 'supreme person', (*Purushottaman*) of the Bhagavad Gita, the 'unborn, beginningless, great Lord of the world, the 'supreme Brahman, the supreme abode, the supreme purity, the eternal divine Person (*purusha*), the primal God (*adideva*), the unborn, the omnipresent (*vibhum*)'.

Finally, we could speak of the spirit as the *Ananda*, the Bliss or Joy of the Godhead, the outpouring of the super-abundant being and consciousness of the eternal, the Love which unites Father and Son in the non-dual Being of the Spirit. This spirit is also the *Atman*, the Breath (*pneuma*) of God, which is in all creation and gives life to every living thing, which in man becomes conscious and grows with the growth of consciousness, until it becomes pure, intuitive wisdom. The *Atman* is the spirit of God in man, when the human spirit becomes wholly pervaded by the divine spirit and attains to pure consciousness. It is conscious Bliss, consciousness filled with joy, with the delight of Being. This was the spirit which filled the soul of Jesus and gave him perfect consciousness of his relationship as Son to the eternal ground of being in the Godhead.¹⁹⁴

This passage presents us with some the most important Hindu terms for man and God as used in Bede's writings. According to Trapnell, *purusha* "is the crucial term in Hinduism that Bede thought could be used in the formulation of an Indian Christology."¹⁹⁵ The three terms *brahman*, *atman* and *purusha* were also identified as particularly important in *The Cosmic Revelation*:

In these three words: *Brahman*, *Atman*, the 'Self' or 'Spirit,' and *Purusha*, 'Person,' we can see how the Hindu came to understand the Mystery of the Cosmos. First of all, looking round on the world he discovered Brahman as the ground of all being; then he discovered the Atman, the Self, as the ground of all consciousness; and then he rose to the conception of the Purusha and saw how Brahman, Atman, and Purusha, the Personal God, are all one.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 91.

¹⁹⁴ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 190-191.

¹⁹⁵ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 5.

¹⁹⁶ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 48.

For Bede it is particularly important that these three terms are interrelated, and that they can to some extent be interchangeable, while they also denote three distinct realities—the individual, the cosmic and the transcendent aspects of a single reality. In a later work, *A New Vision of Reality*, Bede presents these terms as approachable on three different levels, as exemplified in his treatment of the term *brahman*:

The *brahman* is the supreme Reality but he, or it, manifests in the whole created universe and in the human heart. This means that sometimes the universe can be called *brahman*: “All this world is *brahman*.” Or it can be said of the human being: “I am *brahman*, *aham brahmasmi*.” He is thus the one Supreme manifesting at these different levels.¹⁹⁷

Elsewhere, Bede also points out how the composite Sanskrit terms *paramabrahman*, *paramatman*, and *purushottama* point to a higher, supreme reality, translated as “the supreme Brahman, the Supreme Self, the Supreme Person”¹⁹⁸ in *The Marriage of East and West*. This distinction is repeated in *A New Vision of Reality*, where Bede interprets the term *purushottaman* as referring to “the true cosmic Lord.”¹⁹⁹

Bede also presents several quite broad interpretations of *purusha* in *The Marriage of East and West*, focusing on metaphysical dualities:

There is the physical aspect of matter (*Prakriti*), the feminine principle, from which everything evolves, and consciousness (*Purusha*) the masculine principle of reason and order in the universe. These correspond to the Yin and Yang of Chinese tradition and the matter and form of Aristotle.²⁰⁰

A little later in the text *purusha* is used to refer to a certain aspect or principle found in God: “Purusha is the active principle in the Godhead manifesting itself as light and life and intelligence; Prakriti is the feminine principle, which in the Godhead is the Sakti, the divine power or energy.” Bede laments that there has apparently been “very little recognition of this feminine aspect of God” in Christianity, but goes on to conclude that it may be “possible ... to see in the Holy Spirit the feminine aspect of God in the Trinity.”²⁰¹ A similar understanding is found in a chapter in *Return to the Centre* called “The Mystery of the Spirit”, where Bede first states that the Spirit “is the Sakti – the power of the Godhead”²⁰², specifying in the very next paragraph that “[t]he Spirit is the Atman, the Self, which dwells in the heart of every

¹⁹⁷ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 132-33.

¹⁹⁸ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 87.

¹⁹⁹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 133.

²⁰⁰ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 53.

²⁰¹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 55.

²⁰² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 129.

creature.”²⁰³ Finally, towards the end of *The Marriage of East and West*, in a section dealing with issues related to ecclesiology and soteriology, the terms *purusha* and *prakriti* are used to describe Christ and the Church:

The Church is the Pleroma, the fullness, the consummation of all things, the term of the whole evolutionary process. The divine *Purusha* has taken possession of *Prakriti*, Nature, and filled her with his presence. In other words Nature has been wholly penetrated with consciousness, and Man and Nature have become one with the eternal Spirit.²⁰⁴

In his study on Bede’s theology Wayne Teasdale briefly mentions the richness of Hindu terminology and how it causes some difficulty in Bede’s writings: “Of course, all these Sanskrit terms acquire new meanings within the context of a Christian’s experience, and Bede was certainly aware of this fact. He was also aware that many terms are used rather loosely.”²⁰⁵ While this may be so, it is nevertheless important to remember that the interpretation given to terms such as *prakriti/purusha*, *saccidananda*, *brahman/atman* and *nirguna/saguna* is a defining aspect of the various theological traditions within Hinduism as well as the discourses found in the Hindu scriptures themselves. The accuracy of how one uses and defines Sanskrit terms such as the ones just mentioned is particularly important in the context of the Vedantic discourse, and to the extent that Bede wants to develop a Christian Vedanta his use of Vedantic terminology is of great importance if one is to comprehend his own Vedantic position—or indeed if his approach to Vedanta is to be meaningful in the context of the Vedantic discourse.

The above quotations from Bede’s works show how he uses several Hindu terms to describe the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son, for example, is said to be both *saguna*, *cit* and *purusha*. This is not to imply that Bede’s interpretations of these terms is random or lacking in detail: for example, Bede presents an interpretation of the Father as *nirguna*, the Son as *saguna* and the Spirit as *atman* in *The Cosmic Revelation* which is almost identical to the one found in the long passage quoted from *The Marriage of East and West* at the beginning of this section.²⁰⁶ Similarly we have previously seen how the distinction between the Father as *nirguna* and the Son as *saguna* was used by Bede as early as in *Return to the Centre*. My purpose in this brief survey of Bede’s use of Hindu terminology, based on

²⁰³ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 130.

²⁰⁴ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 195.

²⁰⁵ Wayne Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 65.

²⁰⁶ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 45. Here Bede concludes that the term *paramatman* may be used instead of *atman* “to make it clear that the word is used of the ultimate reality.”

passages from *The Marriage of East and West*, is to show both the complexity of Bede's use of Hindu terminology as well as the particular interpretations he gives to some of the most important terms in the Vedantic terminology. How this affects Bede's presentation is something we shall return to in the conclusion of this dissertation.

7. *River of Compassion*: A Detailed Analysis of Hindu Beliefs

We have previously seen how Bede described the *Bhagavad Gita* as going beyond the metaphysics of the Upanishads, in that it focuses on love to a personal God as the means of salvation. In *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, which his most voluminous book, Bede provides us with a closer analysis of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Vedanta and Hinduism than in any of his other publications.

7.1. A Commented Edition of the *Bhagavad Gita*

River of Compassion is based on talks given by Bede at Shantivanam on verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*. The book is edited by Felicity Edwards from recordings of these talks. All the verses of the last seventeen chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita* are printed in full; some remain uncommented, others are provided with comments that span several pages. Bede uses Juan Mascaró's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* into English, but in quite a few cases he refers to other translations and possible readings of particular verses in his commentary. In particular, R.C. Zaehner's translation is cited quite frequently throughout Bede's text. Bede objected that some of Mascaró's translations were too liberal, while others were supposedly too strongly influenced by Christian terminology.²⁰⁷ Bede's limited familiarity with Sanskrit allowed him to elaborate on certain words and phrases in the original text and provide interpretations of these at odds with the ones given by Mascaró and other translators such as Zaehner, but this is done only rarely.

In his introduction to the text, Bede made it clear that "This commentary has been written for the benefit of such people, who do not want an academic study of the *Gita*, of which there are plenty, but who want to use it as a practical guide in their spiritual life."²⁰⁸ This statement notwithstanding, Bede's commentary is not practical in the sense that it gives much attention to the more practical aspects of spiritual life. Rather, it provides the reader with a Christian monk's reflections on the *Bhagavad Gita*, without providing a more detailed study of the text such as one may find in academic editions. In summary, Bede's commentary seems to serve the wants and needs of a broad Western audience.

²⁰⁷ Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita* (New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 41.

²⁰⁸ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 1.

7.2. The Significance of the *Bhagavad Gita* for a Christian Audience

Bede dates the *Bhagavad Gita* as being younger than most, if not all the classical Upanishads, and its teachings are said to reflect the doctrines of the Upanishads.²⁰⁹ The *Bhagavad Gita* is said by Bede to be related to devotional currents within Hinduism such as the theistic Bhagavata movement²¹⁰, but also, although to a lesser degree, with teachings from Jainism and Buddhism.²¹¹ Religious currents that originate outside Aryan society, such as the devotionalism of the Dravidians, are also mentioned as influential in the *Bhagavad Gita*'s contents.

Bede points to this combination of elements from several different Hindu traditions as one of the *Bhagavad Gita*'s greatest strengths. The doctrinal richness of the *Bhagavad Gita* also makes it particularly relevant for contemporary Christianity, since its fusion of different elements may serve as a model for Christians engaged in ecumenical work:

It is trying to integrate the different systems of Yoga and Sankhya into a new doctrine which centres on Krishna as the personal God. For Christians this is particularly valuable, because it shows how we can integrate yoga, and Buddhist methods of meditation, and the metaphysical doctrine of Vedanta with its concepts of *purusha* and *prakriti*, and relate them all to the person of Christ.²¹²

Within devout as well as rigidly orthodox Hindu circles, the *Bhagavad Gita* is traditionally treated as a revealed scripture, spoken by Lord Krishna and recorded as a part of the *Mahabharata*. While Bede acknowledges that the *Bhagavad Gita* is “a sort of New Testament”²¹³ for Hindus, he also clearly identifies the book as having been written by an unknown author who “must have been of extraordinary genius because all religious movements of the time find their place in his work.”²¹⁴ Furthermore the cult around Krishna is said to be of uncertain origins, but as with Shiva his bodily complexion may, according to Bede, point to mythological origins outside Aryan society.²¹⁵

7.3. The Avatara Doctrine

In *Vedanta and Christian Faith* Bede identified the *Bhagavad Gita* as the source of the Hindu notion of divine descent, the *avatara* doctrine.²¹⁶ In *Return to the Centre* the *avatars* are

²⁰⁹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 2.

²¹⁰ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 2.

²¹¹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 3.

²¹² Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 115.

²¹³ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 5.

²¹⁴ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 3.

²¹⁵ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 3-4.

²¹⁶ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 119.

described as belonging to cyclic time, as opposed to Christ, who is revealed within an eschatological framework.²¹⁷

We have seen how Bede previously referred to Krishna first of all as a legendary or even mythological figure, and while the possibility of Krishna's historical existence is not an issue of contention in *River of Compassion*, Bede's attitude is notably different from that found in works such as *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, where Krishna is described as a "human being" who is one of "the great masters of the spiritual life"²¹⁸ just like the Buddha, but also with contemporary figures such as Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharishi²¹⁹—the latter two being mentioned only rarely throughout Bede's works, and then certainly not as incarnations of the divine.

In some regards Bede remains somewhat hesitant to unequivocally identify Krishna as divine in *River of Compassion*: for example, he does not comment on some of the passages where the divinity of Krishna is strongly emphasised in Mascaró's translation, and where at least brief comments on this issue might have been expected in a voluminous work on the *Bhagavad Gita*.²²⁰ But whereas Bede referred to Krishna as merely "speaking in the name of the personal God"²²¹ in *The Cosmic Revelation*, in *River of Compassion* he states that "[h]ere it is made very clear that Krishna is truly the creator God."²²² Krishna is identified as an incarnation of Vishnu,²²³ and the incarnational aspect of Krishna's descent is related to Christianity, since the term *avatara* is "in Christian terms ... conceived as incarnation."²²⁴ Reaffirming his previous stance, Bede writes that

The *avatara* is distinguished from the incarnation in belonging to cyclic time and to a mythological world and in manifesting itself again and again. With the *avatara* there is no fulfilment of history, no sense that this world of space and time is not simply to disappear but to come to its fulfilment. The Christian understanding is that God is working in history and though there is a mythological background to the Old Testament, the story becomes more and more historical as time goes on.²²⁵

Bede's presentation of the difference between Christ and Krishna reiterates his position that Christ brings fulfilment and purpose to history while Krishna is said to exist outside historical

²¹⁷ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 86.

²¹⁸ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 121.

²¹⁹ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 121.

²²⁰ See, for example, Bede's comments to verses 3.24, 4.1 and 7.26.

²²¹ Griffiths, *Cosmic Revelation*, 97.

²²² Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 163.

²²³ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 190.

²²⁴ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 62.

²²⁵ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 68.

time; yet a new and important nuance is added when the anthropological dimension of Christ's incarnation is not identified as the primary difference between the two:

Many people would say that the difference is that in Christ, God became man, but I find that very difficult to argue. From all evidence, Krishna is God becoming man, but not God becoming man in a unique, historical way, as a unique person bringing fulfilment to human history.²²⁶

For Bede, then, the crucial point of contention is whether the Hindu *avatars* may be unequivocally described as holding of the same importance as Christ. Based on the separation previously drawn between cosmic and historical revelation, Bede rejects this idea. In his next book, *A New Vision of Reality*, he similarly rejects the possibility of describing Jesus as “simply ... an *avatara*”:

For a Hindu there is no difficulty in speaking of Jesus as God since in Hinduism every human being is potentially divine and anyone who has realised his divinity is entitled to be called God or *Bhagavan*. Jesus thus appears to him simply as an *avatara*, one of the many forms in which God has appeared on earth.²²⁷

A New Vision of Reality contains several other passages where the *avatara* doctrine is presented in a light that may surprise Hindu readers. In the chapter *God and the World*, Bede reiterates the point that the revelation of Christ occurs “at a particular time and at a particular place.”²²⁸ For the Hindu on the other hand, “the *avatara* is first of all not historical.”²²⁹ The historicity of Christian revelation is even said to be “absolutely alien to Hinduism or Buddhism. When Krishna or Rama, or Buddha in the Mahayana, lived is of no account whatsoever; they are manifestations of the eternal, not confined to any time or space.”²³⁰ The opposite is said to be true for Christianity, which operates within an eschatological understanding of time, and “[t]his is why Jesus is said to be not an *avatara* who can come again and again, nor a buddha[sic] who has many other buddhas before and after him, but rather the one who brings the whole purpose and meaning of the entire universe to a head.”²³¹

These quotations from *A New Vision of Reality* show that Bede identifies a fundamental difference between Hindu *avatars* and the Christian Incarnation. But to what extent can his description of the *avatara* doctrine said to be accurate? The statement that “in Hinduism every human being is potentially divine and anyone who has realised his divinity is entitled to be

²²⁶ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 69.

²²⁷ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 114.

²²⁸ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 165.

²²⁹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 165.

²³⁰ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 166.

²³¹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 166.

called God or *Bhagavan*” is certainly not valid within Vaishnavism, the religious tradition in which the *avatara* doctrine was originally developed. We have seen Bede as referring to Madhva’s clear distinction between God, creation and man, and similar divides can be found in all the Vaishnava systems of Vedanta, in which the doctrine that man is in some sense distinct from God, and does not “become God” as such is a crucial tenet which serves to distinguish Vaishnava Vedanta from Advaita Vedanta.

The *avatara* doctrine was elaborated on at great length in several of the Vaishnava schools of Vedanta, some of which even distinguish between different kinds of *avatars*, an idea which is also found in the Puranas. For example, the Gaudiya tradition distinguished between a wide variety of *avatars*, including *yugavatars* (which descend in the various ages or *yugas*), *lilavatars* (which descend to display God’s “play”, or modalities of his nature) and *shaktyavesha-avatars* as well as several other kinds of *avatars*.²³² The concept of *shaktyavesha-avatars* is of particular interest in the context of Bede’s comments on the *avatara* doctrine, since it implies that God may temporarily empower human beings with divine qualities. But even the existence of this type of *avatara* does not validate with the statement that “anyone who has realised his divinity is entitled to be called God or *Bhagavan*” as these terms are generally understood.

Furthermore, some of the *avatars* are said to descend repeatedly, while others are said to descend only once—even if they do descend within the framework of cyclical time. We have seen how Bede finds the Hindu idea of cyclic time to be unsatisfactory, a position he maintains throughout his writings. From this perspective it is possible for Bede to conclude that “when Krishna or Rama, or Buddha in the Mahayana, lived is of no account whatsoever; they are manifestations of the eternal, not confined to any time or space.” But this perspective would be difficult to maintain within Vaishnava Vedanta; all the *avatars* are said to descend at particular times and at specific places *within* the Hindu understanding of cyclic time, and their descent is caused by or related to events within this particular framework. The cause of their descent can hardly be described as random or “of no account whatsoever” within the Puranic or Vaishnava cosmology, even though this framework does not correspond with the modern concept of time or Bede’s Christian eschatology.

Of course the point that Hindu *avatars* and the Christian Incarnation are dissimilar is shared by most, if not all Christian theologians. In this sense Bede’s conclusion that the Incarnation is unique is hardly controversial. However, as I have tried to show, Bede’s

²³² The variety of different types of *avatars* is also noted by Brockington in *Hinduism and Christianity*, 26-27.

presentation of the Hindu understanding of the *avatars* lacks important nuances, and accordingly his presentation of the *avatara* doctrine contains important misrepresentations of Hinduism. The statement that “anyone who has realised his divinity is entitled to be called God or *Bhagavan*” is certainly not valid within most of the orthodox or traditional segments of Hinduism, and it would need to be qualified in order to be representative of even the Advaita system or the speculative discourses of the Upanishads, wherein man may said to be identical with God, for in Advaita Vedanta *bhagavan* ultimately merges into the unqualified oneness of *brahman*.

In the context of Bede’s use of the term *bhagavan* it may be pointed out that he seems to separate clearly between terms such as *bhagavan* and *deva*. While the two terms are to my knowledge never compared directly in any of Bede’s writings, in several of his works Bede not only compares, but identifies the *devas* as either angels or “the ‘cosmic powers’ of St Paul.”²³³ In a passage on many different gods of Hinduism (including Krishna and Shiva) in *The Marriage of East and West* Bede states that “[t]hey are all symbols of ultimate realities.”²³⁴ Nevertheless, despite Bede’s somewhat ambiguous treatment of Krishna, he does not question the particular importance given to Krishna and Shiva in Vaishnavism and Shaivism respectively, and as we have previously seen Bede pointed out the notion of a personal and supreme god as one of the most important aspects of the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. In *A New Vision of Reality* he similarly describes the henotheism of early Judaism as “much like the *deva* in Vedic Religion.”²³⁵

7.4. *Bhagavad Gita* and the Notion of Transmigration

For Bede the importance of the *Bhagavad Gita* is not only its focus on a personal, loving God or its position as a scripture of paramount importance for the study of Vedanta, but also its transformative influence on Hindu society:

What changed everything was the doctrine of the *Gita*, that the householder, living an ordinary life but having *bhakti*, devotion to God, could reach this state of supreme union, not only as well as, but even more easily than the *sannyasi*. For the *Bhagavad Gita*, *sannyasa* is a difficult path for the few; *bhakti* is the normal path for the many.²³⁶

Quite early in the work, in his elaborations to the second chapter in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Bede is of course confronted with references to reincarnation and *karma*, a topic referred to

²³³ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 56.

²³⁴ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 173.

²³⁵ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 79.

throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*. The interpretation of this doctrine is of course particularly difficult for a Christian writer who wants to see Hinduism and Christianity as complementary.

Here it may be useful to mention how the theology of Gregory of Nyssa was particularly important for Bede's own theological project. While the actual doctrines of Gregory of Nyssa are hardly ever referred to in Bede's writings (as opposed to those of Thomas Aquinas), his theology plays a pivotal role in Bede's own writings, and Bede repeatedly point him out as "the greatest mystical theologian in the early church"²³⁷ in several of his writings.²³⁸ Elements from the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa on such issues as the inherent desire for God said to exist in all men, human history as a sacred story of fall and redemption, God's total otherness and the emphasis on an higher, apophatic mysticism focusing on the ineffability of God all parallel points found in Bede's own writings.

As opposed to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa did not accept the soul as pre-existent. In line with the orthodox understanding, Bede of course agreed with Nyssa on this, yet he also supported Nyssa's conclusion that the notion of hell as an eternal state was untenable. Bede also promoted the somewhat controversial notion of universal salvation, which also resonates with the theology of Gregory of Nyssa. In *The Marriage of East and West*, for example, Bede described "the doctrine of everlasting punishment" as "surely the most terrible doctrine ever preached by any religion."²³⁹ While Bede's position on this issue may not be fully orthodox, his perspective on reincarnation was certainly in line with Church teachings.

Bede generally did not hesitate to comment on what he perceived as flaws or shortcomings in Hinduism and Vedanta. Yet in his early works he only rarely commented on the doctrine of karma and reincarnation—and then only in passing. One of the first references to this crucial idea in Vedanta is found in *Return to the Centre*:

What is one to say about reincarnation? Sankara said that 'the Lord is the only transmigrator'. This makes it meaningful. There is one Self who becomes incarnate in humanity. He is the indweller in the heart of every human being. It is this Self, the indwelling Spirit, who passes from life to life. 'As a man lays aside outworn garments and takes others that are new, so the body-dweller puts away outworn bodies and goes to others that are new.' Mankind as a whole, humanity in the total course of its history, is the body of this one Spirit. All men, as Aquinas says, are one Man.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 5.

²³⁷ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 79.

²³⁸ See, for example, Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 85 and Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 164.

²³⁹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 109.

²⁴⁰ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 30-31.

Neither this brief observation on reincarnation nor the interpretation of *Bhagavad Gita* 2.22 provided in it adequately describe the belief held by most Hindus, whether or not they claim allegiance to Shankara. Indeed, this passage provides us with an example of how Bede presents one particular understanding of a notion common to most Hindus, which is then compared to Christianity so as to “make it meaningful”; Bede then proceeds to provide a possible Christian interpretation of this one particular aspect of Hindu theology without elaborating on other possible Hindu interpretations of the very same doctrine—which may in many cases, such as in the treatment of *brahman*’s nature, provide Hindu notions that are often quite similar to ideas and dogmas found in Christian theology.

It is worth noting that Bede does not primarily seek to *reject* the notion of reincarnation; rather, he calls for it to be reinterpreted so as to become meaningful within a Christian context. This was made clear in *The Cosmic Revelation*, where Bede presented a definition of reincarnation as it is commonly understood within Hinduism:

This is the basis of the doctrine of rebirth: you are born in a particular way in this world because of your actions, your karma, in a previous birth. If you are suffering now, it is because you did evil actions in the past. This can become very crude and fatalistic, but it can also be meaningful. It can come very near to the Christian conception of original sin; this depends on how it is interpreted. The *Bhagavad-Gita* introduces a very profound understanding of what karma really means.²⁴¹

The above passages make it clear that Bede saw the *Bhagavad Gita* as particularly important for a fruitful understanding of reincarnation. Yet while his comments on this topic were quite brief in his previous books, in *River of Compassion* this issue is dealt with repeatedly and at greater length, through a series of interpretations and observations on some of the verses where this doctrine is elaborated on in the text of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Bede’s presentation of reincarnation in *River of Compassion* may be said to deal with three quite separate issues. Of primary importance for Bede is the attempt to formulate an interpretation of reincarnation that can be meaningful within the context of Christian theology. Secondly, he aims to present an accurate summary of reincarnation as found in the text of the *Bhagavad Gita* itself. Thirdly, Bede very briefly presents reincarnation as it is understood within Hinduism at large.

Bede acknowledges the idea of reincarnation as integral to Hinduism. This was emphasised in *The Cosmic Revelation*, where reincarnation was presented as one of the elements that identify Hinduism as a cosmic religion with a cyclic understanding not only of time, but even

²⁴¹ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 90.

of human existence.²⁴² In *River of Compassion* Bede states that he is “always hesitant of the idea of reincarnation”²⁴³ as it is understood within Hinduism, that is, as “the individual soul passing from one body to another.”²⁴⁴ He finds the idea of reincarnation to be objectionable since it does not give any finality to human life: “To say that the individual, when he dies, is not going to meet Christ, or to enter into eternal life, and that he is going to be reborn in this world, is contrary to the Christian view.”²⁴⁵ He does not mention how the souls are said to eventually “enter into eternal life” in the various schools of Vedanta, even if this will not necessarily occur after one’s current lifespan.

The above quote on the soul “going to meet Christ” after death is qualified in another passage in *The River of Compassion* where Bede asserts that “[i]f we are unpurified, then the fire of purgatory has to purify us before we are capable of receiving that life and entering into it.”²⁴⁶ Interestingly, while Bede is normally eager to point out similarities between doctrines and ideas from different systems of belief, he does not compare the idea of purgatory with the Hindu idea of transmigration, even though both the idea of purgatory and *samsara* may both imply a process of purification which to some extent is seen as a prerequisite before man can finally attain a divine realm in both traditions.

We have previously quoted Bede as condemning the idea of an eternal hell. In *The River of Compassion* Bede apparently embraces the idea of universal salvation in an original interpretation of the Last Judgement: “So at death we simply pass beyond the world of appearances into the reality of our being, in the Self. We see ourself[sic] in the Lord and the Lord in ourself[sic]; and that is the Last Judgement.”²⁴⁷ Similarly Bede asserts that “[t]here is no everlasting hell in either the Hindu or the Buddhist tradition ... Everybody is eventually saved. On the other hand, we have the problem of hell in the Christian tradition.”²⁴⁸ This rather broad statement does not allow for Hindu notions of hell such as Madhva’s teaching of predetermination, which to my knowledge are not mentioned by Bede at all. It also puts in question the conventional understanding of hell as found within the Catholic tradition—with such exceptions as Gregory of Nyssa.

²⁴² Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 118.

²⁴³ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 64.

²⁴⁴ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 64.

²⁴⁵ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 267.

²⁴⁶ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 268.

²⁴⁷ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 268.

²⁴⁸ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 286.

In his attempt to provide a possible Christian interpretation of the doctrine of reincarnation, Bede is particularly interested in verse 15.6, which in Juan Mascaró's translation (as used by Bede) seems to be particularly well-suited for a Christian reinterpretation.²⁴⁹ Bede summarises his own understanding of reincarnation as follows: "This is strong support for saying that it is the Lord who is the transmigrator. It is not the individual soul that manifests; it is the Lord."²⁵⁰

Bede objects to the interpretation of the Sanskrit *ishvara* as referring to the individual soul in this verse, a reading he acknowledges as supported by Shankara as well as in R.C. Zaehner's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Instead, Bede opts for an interpretation in which the word *ishvara* refers to the Lord. This understanding is also elaborated elsewhere in *River of Compassion*:

The one Spirit is incarnate in each person. The eternal spirit takes flesh in you and me and experiences in the body and in the soul of each one of us; it then goes on and experiences in another body and another life. The whole history of humanity is the history of this one Spirit experiencing all these different lives and leading all to fulfillment at the end. That is a possible explanation.²⁵¹

This interpretation must be understood not only in the context of Bede's theology (in the narrow meaning of the term), but also in the context of his anthropology. We have seen Bede struggling with the anthropology found in the various Vedantic systems, and of course he was well aware that terms such as *purusha*, *atman* and *ishvara* may refer both to the individual soul as well as a higher reality (whether this higher reality is understood to be of a personal or impersonal nature). In Bede's writings the issue of "non-duality" is always of great importance, and one important aspect of non-duality as understood by Bede is that man is at his deepest level one with God—an understanding of non-duality which is elaborated on so as to be both Catholic as well as open to a broader interpretation. Thus while Bede distinguished between the triune Godhead and human creatures, his anthropology is also closely related to his understanding of God as being the topmost aspect of man, the Spirit, which is the transmigrating entity:

So the Spirit is the point where the whole human being comes to a head, as it were, the point at which it reaches out and touches the divine, where the Spirit of God meets the spirit of man. That is why when we reach death, the Spirit is set free from the material body, from the whole time sequence, and from the present

²⁴⁹ "When the Lord of the body arrives, and when he departs and wanders on, he takes them over with him, as the wind takes perfumes from their places of sleep." Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 265-66.

²⁵⁰ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 266.

²⁵¹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 14.

mode of consciousness, and we enter into the mode of the Spirit and experience the whole of life in its unity.²⁵²

While Bede is eager to provide an interpretation of reincarnation that is acceptable for the Christian reader, it may be asked if his description of transmigration can accommodate for the more common understanding of reincarnation—or, more importantly in this context, Hindu teachings on reincarnation. Bede’s own interpretation of reincarnation remains quite stable throughout his works, but he nevertheless hesitates to comment on some of the verses in the *Bhagavad Gita* that are traditionally understood as declaring the doctrine of reincarnation quite unequivocally, such as verse 2.12. Bede’s brief commentary to this particular verse omits the question of reincarnation altogether.²⁵³

Yet elsewhere in his commentary, Bede acknowledges the *Bhagavad Gita* as actually promoting the idea of reincarnation as it is normally understood, without trying to reinterpret or challenge the Hindu understanding. Commenting on *Bhagavad Gita* 18.19, for example, Bede concludes that “it probably means they are born again. In the view of the *Gita*, our evil deeds pursue us in another life and we go into an evil womb: we are born with an evil nature.”²⁵⁴ Elsewhere he is clearer still: “This is the philosophy of the *Gita*. Everyone is bound by his *karma*, the actions of past lives.”²⁵⁵

Summing up, Bede’s understanding of reincarnation does not vary to any noteworthy degree from one work to another. On the other hand his presentation of the Hindu understanding of reincarnation shows important variances. The belief in reincarnation is common to all the Vedantic systems, and while Bede in one passage claims support for his own Christian interpretation from what he perceives to be Shankara’s position, this interpretation is at odds with the theistic schools of Vedanta—and indeed at odds with Hinduism at large.

7.5. Theism, *advaita* and the *Bhagavad Gita*

As we have seen, for Bede the most important aspect of the *Bhagavad Gita* is its emphasis on devotion to a loving, personal God, a doctrine that in the *Bhagavad Gita* occurs in a rich context which accommodates elements both from currents within Hinduism such as *samkhya*, yoga, Vedanta and *bhakti*, as well as ideas from Buddhism. Throughout his commentary, Bede rarely refers to the classical Hindu commentaries of the *Bhagavad Gita* (and then mostly

²⁵² Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 18.

²⁵³ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 13-14.

²⁵⁴ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 286.

to the commentaries of Shankara and Ramanuja, as referred to throughout Zaehner's commented translation). Furthermore he rarely presents non-theistic interpretations of individual verses of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In one passage Bede even presents Shankara as reserving the possibility of liberation to men, while the *Bhagavad Gita* allows for both women and "all devout souls" to attain salvation²⁵⁶. The universal call to salvation through loving self-surrender is identified as the central point in the spirituality of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

"[H]igher than meditation is surrender in love of the fruit of one's actions, for from surrender follows peace." The meaning of this seems to be that total self-surrender in love brings one to God more effectively than any other method. So that is the path of the *Gita* and that is the path which many follow. Such self-surrender to God is the most fundamental way and anybody can practice it. ... To accept the will of God in everything that comes, in total self-surrender is the most perfect way and the most universal. It is not that there is a lower way which everybody can practice and a higher way for the few. The commonest, most universal way is the most profound. The others are special ways.²⁵⁷

Bede draws a comparison between the teachings on love as propounded in the *Bhagavad Gita* and in the Gospel, and love is presented as the most important element in spiritual practice:

So it makes a great difference if the ultimate reality is conceived as love, and not merely as consciousness. Towards the end of the *Gita* the idea that God is love is emerging. That is the supreme achievement of the *Gita* in Hinduism and it is also the central focus of the Gospel.²⁵⁸

But while love holds an important position in Bede's system, the personal aspect of God is not presented as unique or exclusive, or indeed even taking precedence over the impersonal aspect. God is "[t]otally immanent and totally transcendent"²⁵⁹, and to present the personal aspect as supreme remains problematic in Bede's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

The common Christian view which Zaehner puts forward is that the personal God is above the impersonal Brahman. Among Hindus, the advaitins say on the contrary that the impersonal Brahman is above the personal God, the latter being merely a manifestation of the transcendent One. The view which I hold and which I think is that of the *Gita* is that the personal and impersonal are simply two aspects of the one Reality, which is beyond our comprehension.²⁶⁰

To draw a distinction between personal and impersonal aspects of God that runs clear of denouncing one aspect as non-existent is of course perfectly possible within the framework of Vedanta, where the exact definition of the ultimate reality has always been contended. It is

²⁵⁵ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 212.

²⁵⁶ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 180.

²⁵⁷ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 225.

²⁵⁸ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 94.

²⁵⁹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 240.

²⁶⁰ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 220.

within this discourse that Bede seeks to formulate his own understanding of God's nature in *River of Compassion*, which implies crossing beyond even *brahman*:

Vedantic philosophers often talk as though when one reaches the supreme state there is no longer a Lord to adore, there is no worship, there is no love left. One simply is that One and this is considered to be the supreme state. But that is only a particular level of consciousness. If we go beyond that level, there is activity, there is love, there is adoration. We come back to the origin, in a sense. We become like a little child, but with the wisdom which comes from total fulfilment.²⁶¹

This passage seems to mark a clear and definite break with Bede's previous affinity for the Advaita system of Vedanta, so highly esteemed in some of his earlier works; the Christian is called to cross beyond even *advaita* as it is commonly understood: "One has to go beyond both the sensible and the intelligible world, beyond even the 'still state' of Brahman, and discover the personal God, who is 'known by love', who reveals himself to those who open themselves to his love."²⁶²

7.6. Bede's Criticism of R.C. Zaehner's Commentary

This new orientation in Bede's own theology seems to have been inspired by R.C. Zaehner; for example, in his commentary to verse 6.2 of the *Bhagavad Gita* Bede approvingly paraphrases Zaehner as claiming that "beyond this steady state of Brahman one discovers a deeper reality" which is "much more profound"²⁶³. Zaehner's own translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* deals with the text on a far more technical and detailed level than Bede's, and in some cases Bede presents objections to Zaehner's conclusions about the nature of the ultimate reality as expressed in the *Bhagavad Gita*. An important example that highlights Bede's own conclusions is found in his comments to *Bhagavad Gita* 14.27:

Zaehner translates this as, "I am the base supporting Brahman", the *Brahmano pratistha*, but his attempt to show that Krishna is above Brahman is based on a misunderstanding. The relation between Brahman and the personal God may be illustrated by the ideal of circumincession within the Trinity. The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father, but the Father is not superior to the Son. They are distinct yet they are one. Krishna is in Brahman and Brahman is in him. They are different aspects of the One.²⁶⁴

While Zaehner—a fellow convert to Catholicism, who according to Brockington developed a gradation of mystical experiences in which theistic mysticism was given preference²⁶⁵—

²⁶¹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 273.

²⁶² Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 272.

²⁶³ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 119.

²⁶⁴ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 261.

²⁶⁵ Brockington, *Hinduism and Christianity* (Houndmills, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992), 178.

is presented as positioning the God of the *Bhagavad Gita* as existing *above* Brahman, Bede sees God and *brahman* as fundamentally one. Incidentally, here it may be noted that Bede's example of the Trinity could also have been modified to support Zaehner's translation of verse 14.27 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, since in Catholic theology the Son is said to proceed from the Father.

Throughout Bede's writings the issue of how to understand *brahman* is always more than mere semantics; this is so even though Bede's understanding changes over time, and despite the fact that the ultimate reality is said to be unspeakable. As we have seen in our survey of *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, one of the most important aspects of his theology is that all the world religions refer to a single, transcendent reality, a reality which is attainable by all authentic religious endeavour. From this perspective the terms used to describe the ultimate reality are of a lesser importance, and we have previously seen Bede refer to religious terminology and symbolism as signs that are necessarily divisive, and which only serve as signs pointing towards the ultimate reality, which defies description.

Accordingly, in Bede's theology both Tao, the Trinity, Nirvana and *brahman* are terms that may be used to describe different aspects of the same, ultimate reality, a perspective which would run quite contrary to the understanding which prevails within the different Vedantic traditions. Of course there is the long-standing divide between the Vedantic schools, which ascribe quite different significance to terms such as *brahman*, *mukti*, *atman*, *prakriti* and so on. The chasm between Hinduism and Buddhism is deeper still.

In his commentary to *Bhagavad Gita* 6.28, Bede approves of Zaehner's translation of the term *brahman-samsparsham* as "the touch of Brahman" as more accurate than Mascaró's "the infinite joy of union with God".²⁶⁶ The reason for this preference is Zaehner's perceived faithfulness towards the Sanskrit text, described by Bede as follows: "God is the personal God, and Brahman is the impersonal aspect of the Godhead. It is important to maintain this distinction."²⁶⁷ Yet in the next paragraph of his commentary, Bede takes issue with Zaehner's commentary where the latter writes that "This is Brahman's saving touch which brings unbounded infinite joy. It is the touch of which the Buddhist knows nothing."²⁶⁸

From the Vedantic perspective the Buddhist *nirvana* is often conceived of as a completely negative state devoid even of existence, whereas *brahman* is conceived of in positive terms

²⁶⁶ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 122.

²⁶⁷ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 122.

²⁶⁸ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 123.

(that is, as a state which is always understood as eternally existing, whether it is described as personal or impersonal). From this Vedantic perspective, Buddhism is conceived as denying the very existence of *brahman* insofar as *nirvana* is said by Buddhists to be the ultimate existence; hence the existence of the *atman* is seen as being denied in Buddhism by Vedantic theologians. It is this traditional divide between Hinduism and Buddhism that is referred to by Zaehner, and which Bede finds objectionable:

So Zaehner says, “by the maximum concentration of all that is in us into the infinitely small, the timeless Self, one finds that this nothing is, nevertheless, conformed to infinity.” Although Zaehner doubts that this is a Buddhist experience, this emptiness which is total fulfilment is, as I understand it, very much the experience of Nirvana in the Mahayana tradition.²⁶⁹

In his commentary Bede does not elaborate on his claim, but instead moves on to other aspects of Zaehner’s commentary to the same verse. Neither does he discuss whether Zaehner refers to *early* Buddhism or rather Buddhism in general. Indeed, while this is not explicitly specified in Zaehner’s commentary, it would appear that he is describing the early Buddhism prevalent at the time of the composition of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and not the later developments in Buddhist philosophy referred to by Bede.²⁷⁰ While Bede’s understanding of Buddhism as such is not of relevance for this dissertation, as we shall soon see it is important to point out that Bede approves of how Zaehner accommodates for the distinction between “the personal god” and *brahman*, while disapproving of Zaehner’s assertion that *brahman* is unknown for the Buddhist—that is, outside the scope of Buddhism.

Elsewhere in *River of Compassion*, while Bede does not explicitly equate *nirvana* (as understood in Buddhism) with the Hindu experience of *brahman*, it is nevertheless clear from his presentation that the ultimate state as experienced in Buddhism is perceived to be identical to the Hindu *brahman*: “From a Buddhist point of view there is no Self, one simply becomes Brahman, one becomes that Reality. The Buddha said not to inquire or to try to rationalise it. Simply follow the path and you will reach that state, and then you will know all about it.”²⁷¹ The significance of this equation will be elaborated in my analysis of *The New Creation in Christ*, where Bede explicitly equates the spiritual experience of Hinduism and Buddhism, and where Hindu and Buddhist terminology is used interchangeably to describe the same phenomenon.

²⁶⁹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 123.

²⁷⁰ R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita: With a Commentary Based on the Original Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 230-232.

²⁷¹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 98.

Later on in his commentary, when commenting on *Bhagavad Gita* 12.2, Bede objects to another distinction made by Zaehner: “Krishna declares that those who worship this infinite, imperishable One, attain to his ‘very self’. This makes it clear against Zaehner that there is no real difference between the personal God and the impersonal Godhead.”²⁷² As previously pointed out, the relationship between an “impersonal Godhead” and “the personal God” makes a real difference indeed within the Vedantic discourse, where the way this difference is interpreted is the paramount divisive factor between Advaita and Vaishnava Vedanta.

In this summary of Bede’s use of Zaehner’s commentary I have tried to point out several points that will be important for the conclusions I will draw in the conclusion of my dissertation; to my understanding Bede’s use of Zaehner’s commentary reflects some of the most important aspects of Bede’s own theological system.

²⁷² Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, p. 221.

8. A Wider Perspective: *A New Vision of Reality*

A New Vision of Reality reproduces a series of talks given by Bede at Shantivanam, edited by Felicity Edwards. While many of the topics discussed in this book remain outside the scope of this dissertation, elements from Vedanta and other Hindu traditions continue to be incorporated into Bede's new approach to religion, one in which religion is integrated into a wider context—a point which in turn affects Bede's presentation of Hinduism.

8.1. A New Science

In the 1979 introduction to *The Golden String*, Bede expressed a strong objection to modern science, an objection he had maintained since his younger, pre-monastic years. His main objection to “Western science and technology” at this stage was its understanding of creation as separate from human consciousness. In his 1979 introduction Bede rejected the possibility that these shortcomings could be remedied by modifying science, for it “is not due to some defect in the use of science and technology, which can be corrected. Western science and technology are based on a false philosophy which has undermined the whole of Western civilisation.”²⁷³

Twelve years later, in one of his last interviews, Bede exclaimed that he had “completely changed his attitude to science.”²⁷⁴ In the 1980's he studied the works of authors such as Fritjof Capra, Ken Wilber, Rupert Sheldrake (who lived at Shantivanam for 18 months²⁷⁵) and David Bohm with great interest. What particularly impressed Bede was their effort to show that science, philosophy and religion refer to a single reality, and how these writers pinpointed commonalities between science, philosophy and religion, as well as the interrelatedness of the physical reality with a higher level of reality not commonly perceived.

In *A New Vision of Reality* this new approach to science is a key issue. Referring to *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra, Bede asserts that modern science is entering a new phase, one that is more in line with his own understanding: “A new vision is penetrating the scientific world.”²⁷⁶ It is to this particular *approach* to science Bede is referring when he claims to have modified his stance on the value of scientific research, rather than the physical sciences as such.

²⁷³ Griffiths, *The Golden String*, vi.

²⁷⁴ Bede Griffiths quoted in Swindells, *A Human Search*, 106.

²⁷⁵ Griffiths, *Beyond the Darkness*, 198.

8.2. Bede Griffiths and *Tantra*

In *Vedanta and Christian Faith* the “theological tradition” was identified by Bede as the orthodox element within Christianity, and Vedanta was referred to as a similar orthodox tradition within Hinduism. A similar focus is maintained throughout Bede’s later books, even though they contain numerous excursions into other topics within the field of Hinduism, as well as other religions. In *A New Vision of Reality* this focus on what was previously perceived as the orthodox element within Hinduism is modified. In an exposition on the development of Hinduism, the teachings of the Upanishads are still said to culminate in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which “marks an advance even on the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* in that Krishna is revealed as both totally transcendent and totally immanent.”²⁷⁷ Only a few paragraphs later, however, Bede concludes that “[a] further stage in the development of the ideas of God is found in the Tantras.”²⁷⁸

In a certain sense this emphasis on *tantra* as a corrective to the *Bhagavad-gita* is also expressed in *River of Compassion*, where Bede disagrees with the general understanding of *tamas* as undesirable, urging that “we should always remember that *tamas* has also a positive character...”²⁷⁹ For Bede, “[*t*]amas is inertia, but it is also firmness, a solidity, in the sense of being ‘down to earth.’ So each [i.e., *guna*] has its place.”²⁸⁰ This understanding does not harmonise with the conventional Vedantic understanding, where *tamas* and *rajas* are seen as undesirable, and to be avoided in preference for *sattva*. In this regard Bede refers to the authority of Aurobindo: “Over-emphasis on *sattva* in certain schools of Hinduism could well be a sign of neglect of the material aspect of life, as Sri Aurobindo maintained.”²⁸¹

Another relevant passage on Bede’s perspective on *tantra* from his earlier writings is found in *Return to the Centre*, where Bede approves of Aurobindo’s system of yoga and uses it as a model for a Christian yoga:

In the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo the values of matter and life and human consciousness and the experience of a personal God are not lost in the ultimate Reality, the divine Saccidananda. Matter and life and consciousness in man are seen to be evolving towards the divine life and the divine consciousness, in which they are not annihilated but fulfilled.

This is the goal of a Christian yoga. Body and soul are to be transfigured by the divine life and to participate in the divine consciousness. There is a descent of the Spirit into matter and a corresponding ascent, by which matter is transformed by the indwelling power of the Spirit and the body is transfigured.²⁸²

²⁷⁶ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 9.

²⁷⁷ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 73.

²⁷⁸ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 74.

²⁷⁹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 254.

²⁸⁰ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 309.

²⁸¹ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 257.

²⁸² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 137-38.

Bede relates the “corresponding ascent” to Patañjali’s *ashtanga yoga*, while the “descent of the Spirit” is related to *kundalini yoga*. But while the *kundalini* process is identified as an internalised process occurring within the practitioner of *kundalini yoga*, where energy is led through the *cakras*, the Christian equivalent is of a universally salvific nature:

For a Christian this has already taken place in the resurrection of Christ. In his body matter has already been transformed, so as to become a spiritual body, which is the medium of the divine life. The human body by contact with this body of Christ, which is no longer limited by space and time, has within in the seed of the divine life.²⁸³

Bede does not elaborate on the actual practice of yoga in detail in any of his works, and the term yoga is generally used to refer to *ashtanga yoga*. But as we shall soon see, his emphasis on *kundalini* as an alternative approach is an important precursor to his later interest in *tantra* as a corrective to what Bede perceived as a one-sided Vedantic spirituality.

As Bede sees it, the importance of *tantra* is that it serves as an alternative approach to the physical and sensual reality:

The earliest Tantric texts date back from the third century AD but Tantrism goes back beyond that. ... It belongs essentially to the world of magic and myth. At this stage the Tantra begins to enter the main stream of Hinduism and a new development takes place. So far the aim had always been to go beyond the physical and beyond the psychological to the Supreme Reality, and to see everything in that light. In practice that entailed a strong tendency towards asceticism, which prevailed in Hinduism as a whole. Leaving behind the body, the soul, the mind and all its activities, the aim was to unite oneself with the supreme *brahman*, the supreme *atman*. That is the basic movement of *sannyasa*, renunciation. The Tantra arose in opposition to that, to assert the values of nature and of the body, of the senses and of sex. All that world which tended to be suppressed in the other tradition now comes to life. This is why Tantra is particularly important today.²⁸⁴

Tantra, then, is identified as a distinct tradition emerging from the Shaiva tradition and what is perceived as a matriarchal, pre-Aryan society.²⁸⁵ For Bede *tantra* represents a necessary corrective to, and even an advance on the Vedantic tradition stemming from the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Tantra is both the doctrine and the practice of approaching God through matter, through the body, the senses and through sexuality. It is a corrective to the tendency of Vedanta which is to go beyond the body, beyond matter, to the pure Spirit. A great saying in Tantrism is, “That by which we fall is that by which we rise.” As

²⁸³ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 138.

²⁸⁴ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 74-75.

²⁸⁵ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 155.

we fall through our bodies, our senses, our passions, and our desires, so we have to rise through them. We have to use matter and our bodies in order to attain the goal.²⁸⁶

Bede identifies Shaktism as a *tantric* tradition wherein “the mother is everything.”²⁸⁷ *Tantra* is furthermore said to have developed at the same time as the Vedantic systems, but along different lines.

While the emphasis on the mother goddess is particularly strong in Shaktism, in his introduction to Hinduism, Lipner describes how *tantra* and *bhakti* in fact arose at the same time²⁸⁸, and that *tantra* is an element not unique to Shaktism, but also to be found in Shaivism and Vaishnavism.²⁸⁹ Such details are omitted in Bede’s presentation, in which *tantra* is presented in opposition to, rather than as part of *bhakti* and Vaishnava Vedanta.

Bede also briefly mentions Kashmiri Shaivism as containing *tantric* elements, referring to a study by Michael von Bruck.²⁹⁰ However, *tantric* elements within the Vaishnava traditions are not mentioned at all, even where Vaishnava traditions may serve as an example of the encounter between Vedanta and *tantra*. Immediately after a brief summary of the Vedantic systems of Nimbarka and Caitanya, for example, in the very next paragraph Bede proceeds to state that “[a]longside all this, a new movement emerged in India from around the third century AD. This was Tantrism and it represents a very different approach to that of Vedanta.”²⁹¹

In Bede’s presentation of the theistic Vedantin theologians such as Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha and so on, these are identified as Vedantic scholars more than as representatives of theistic traditions that not only encompasses Vedanta, but also elements from other Hindu traditions. In Bede’s exposition *tantra* is said to oppose Vedanta, without any mention of *tantra* as being incorporated into the theology formulated by the Vaishnava theologians who operate within a Vedantic context, while also including elements from Tantrism into their theology, such as in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. While certain strands of Vedanta may be said to oppose *tantra*, this is by no means the case with all the Vedantic traditions. But by omitting to mention this, it becomes possible for Bede to directly oppose *tantra* and Vedanta:

The material world becomes known as *maya*, which is often translated as illusion. The word *maya* is from the root *ma*, to measure, from which the words “matter” and “mother” (*mater* in Latin) are also derived. So the earlier system was fundamentally a separation from matter, from the mother, from the feminine in the attempt

²⁸⁶ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 55.

²⁸⁷ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 156.

²⁸⁸ Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994), 40.

²⁸⁹ Lipner, *Hindus*, 40.

²⁹⁰ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 157.

²⁹¹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 154.

to go beyond. It is a marvellous path in its way but it is one-sided. But now with Tantra the balance is restored as matter, the mother and the feminine are restored to their proper place.²⁹²

While “the mother and the feminine” are certainly present in Vaishnava Vedanta, it would seem that what fascinates Bede the most with *tantra* are the positive connotations given to matter and the physical reality, which he perhaps found lacking in theistic Vedanta. As will be discussed in the conclusion, this may be understood in the context of how Bede’s position on science and contemporary society is also redefined at this time.

8.3. The Importance of Religion: A New Approach

We have seen how Bede moved from a position of *fulfilment* (wherein Christianity is said to provide a further advance on the insights found in other world religions) to one of *complementarity* (wherein the content of dogmas belonging to a particular religious tradition are said to benefit from being understood and reinterpreted in the light of the other world religions) at an early stage in his writings. Along these lines Bede also called for a “return to the centre”, i.e. a call for man to lead a holistic life inspired by the cosmic as well as the historical revelations, which were presented as a corrective to the alleged rationalism of modern society. In *A New Vision of Reality* Bede calls for a wider integration still, in which the “return to the centre” is balanced by “a new vision.”

For Bede, two contemporary religious figures are of particular importance in this regard, as they facilitate a meaningful dialogue between science and religion:

The myth of the new creation has been given a new expression in recent times by Teilhard de Chardin who, writing from a scientific point of view, was able to give it a meaning for modern man. Teilhard presented an evolutionary view of matter evolving into life and into consciousness, as matter developed even greater complexity and concentration. The point at which all matter and life and consciousness finds its ultimate meaning and purpose he called the “Omega point”. He saw the whole universe converging on this ultimate point, where it is locally unified and centered. It is towards that supreme point of unity that the whole creation is moving.

The other person in modern times who had the deepest insight into this mystery is Sri Aurobindo, the sage of Pondicherry in India. What Teilhard de Chardin did for Christianity, Aurobindo did for Hinduism. He developed a system of Vedanta which incorporates the concept of evolution into the Hindu vision of the universe.²⁹³

Here we are reminded of Bede’s objection to Hinduism as being limited by its “cosmic” nature, which allegedly leaves out the possibility of progress and historicity. Aurobindo’s use of evolutionary categories appeals to Bede since it bridges the cosmic and the historical realities, and thereby facilitates a synthesis between the two. Incidentally, Bede’s comparison

²⁹² Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 195.

of Aurobindo and de Chardin is hardly unique: Brockington, for example, claims that there are “distinct similarities between the ideas expressed by these modern writers.”²⁹⁴

Within the synthesis of science and religion the concept of integration is particularly important. Indeed, integration is nothing less than the very goal of human existence: “[T]hat is the ultimate goal in life, to reach that total unity where we experience the whole creation and the whole of humanity reintegrated in the supreme consciousness, in the One, which is pure being, pure knowledge and pure bliss, *saccidananda*.”²⁹⁵

While this may passage resembles ideas found in Bede’s early works such as *Return to the Centre*, in *A New Vision of Reality* he presents a more refined understanding of what is implied by integration, an understanding more similar to the one found in *River of Compassion*:

The importance of integration is often misunderstood, and it is frequently thought that on reaching the level of non-dual awareness everything disappears and there is simply pure identity of being, *saccidananda*, being, knowledge and bliss, without any differentiation.²⁹⁶

The most important aspect of this ultimate, differentiated union is that in it “all forms of being are integrated in a transcendent unity, which as far as it can be described in human terms is a communion of love, that is, of inter-personal relationship.”²⁹⁷ Such an emphasis on integration as an important aspect of non-dualism and *advaita* is expressed frequently in Bede’s later writings.

Just like in *River of Compassion*, Bede laments how Shankara “found it very difficult to account for the created world, for matter and life, time and space. His tendency, in brief, is to say that all that we experience in time and space is ultimately illusory.”²⁹⁸ Always open to challenge the common understanding of Shankara’s teachings, Bede concludes that “in the deeper tradition, this world exists in the Absolute. I think this understanding is present even in Shankara although it is not always clear in his teaching. It is very clear in Hinduism as a whole...”.²⁹⁹ Yet Bede also concedes that “in affirming the transcendent unity [Shankara] found no place for the multiplicity, and for this reason his doctrine was questioned by all

²⁹³ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 92.

²⁹⁴ Brockington, *Hinduism and Christianity*, 100.

²⁹⁵ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 56.

²⁹⁶ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 55

²⁹⁷ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 95.

²⁹⁸ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 152.

²⁹⁹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 152.

subsequent doctors of Vedanta.” This is presented as an important objection to Shankara’s doctrine, since “it shows that there is something lacking in Shankara.”³⁰⁰

In his refutation of monistic currents within Vedanta, Bede does not include the Vaishnava schools of Vedanta as corrective approaches to monism, focusing instead on non-Vedantic systems as more suitable alternatives to the monistic tendencies in Shankara’s system:

It is thought that there are no more individuals and no longer a personal God, but only *saccidananda*, being, knowledge and bliss. That is a profound mystical intuition and Shankara, certainly, realised the unity of all things, but he was not able to reconcile it with differentiation. On the other hand, as we have seen, Kashmiri Shaivism, Buddhism and Sufism have all been able to discern how the differentiation is part of the unity.³⁰¹

The reason why *bhakti* or Vaishnava Vedanta are not included in this list may be found in the next chapter of *A New Vision of Reality*, where Bede deals specifically with *bhakti*. According to Bede, *bhakti* is generally considered as eventually surpassed by *advaita* in Hinduism. God is worshiped in a multitude of different forms in India, but nevertheless “he is regarded as ultimately formless.”³⁰² Hindu *bhakti* implies relationship, transcendence and union, yet it remains “an experience of identity, not of relationship.”³⁰³ Thus Christianity surpasses *bhakti*, since Christianity is supposedly more outspoken in its denial of monism: “The Christian experience is distinctive in that identity with God is not claimed.”³⁰⁴ Bede’s understanding on the issue is summarised in the following passage:

This is what distinguishes the Christian experience of God from that of the Hindu. The Hindu in his deepest experience of *advaita* knows God in an identity of being. “I am Brahman,” “Thou art that.” The Christian experiences God in a communion of being, a relationship of love, in which there is none the less perfect unity of being.³⁰⁵

This statement may of course be compared to other passages quoted in this dissertation where Bede emphasises that *advaita* is only one of several co-existent forms of Vedanta. Indeed this is one of the difficulties facing the serious reader of Bede’s writings: not only does his position on several important issues within the scope of his theological projects change, but even his factual presentation of Hinduism as a religious tradition is often altered on many levels, and different passages from the same work are sometimes quite contradictory. We

³⁰⁰ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 153.

³⁰¹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 174.

³⁰² Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 217.

³⁰³ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 222.

³⁰⁴ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 224.

³⁰⁵ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 220.

have seen how Bede mentioned Kashmiri Shaivism, Buddhism and Sufism as “able to discern how the differentiation is part of the unity”, a problem he describes as unsolved by Shankara—even when he could just as well have shown that differentiation as “part of the unity” is a teaching shared by all the Vaishnava schools of Vedanta (with the possible exception of Madhva’s more explicit dualism). In other words: while Bede would not have to go outside the scope of Vedanta in order to find support for a theology that gives ample allowances to differentiation, he instead chooses to omit the various theistic Vedantic understandings of “differentiation” altogether, in preference for other Hindu and non-Hindu traditions.

Similarly Bede has previously stated that it is erroneous to conclude that *advaita* is necessarily the conclusion of Vedanta or Hinduism, yet at this later point in his writings he claims that “The Hindu in his deepest experience of *advaita* knows God in an identity of being”, something that is contrasted by the Christian experience. In the conclusion we shall discuss what prompts Bede to present such a simplified summary of Hindu theology—even after he has himself warned against the understanding of Vedanta as necessarily monistic as being an inaccurate simplification, or even a distortion.

8.4. A New Age

For Bede the integration of science and religion is not only important because it enables a synthesis of between the two. Bede sees mankind as on the verge of a new phase in its development, one which will mark the end of the materialism and the mechanistic concept of the universe prevalent since the Enlightenment, a period in which reductionism plays a key role.³⁰⁶ Bede refers to both Aurobindo and de Chardin as anticipating such a shift in human consciousness:

In Aurobindo’s view we are now in the stage of evolution from mental consciousness, that is, our present state of dualistic, rational consciousness, into “supramental” consciousness, which corresponds to what Teilhard de Chardin calls the “Omega point.” The Supermind is the supreme manifestation of the ultimate Reality, which acts upon the whole creation, bringing it to fulfilment.

An important aspect of Sri Aurobindo’s thought is that in the final state the differences which exist here on earth are not simply dissolved but are transcended. There is a view, which is very common in India, that when the ultimate state is reached all differences of God and man and creation disappear. But in Aurobindo’s view, as in that of Teilhard de Chardin, the divine consciousness penetrates the whole creation and integrates the whole in the final state of transcendence.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 276.

³⁰⁷ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 93.

While the exact details of this shift in human consciousness fall outside the scope of this dissertation, the notion of transcendence is important insofar as it affects another notion in Bede's later writings: the emergence of a new phase in mankind's development. In this new phase, religious traditions such as Hinduism will gain a new significance.

In *The Marriage of East and West* Bede described this new phase as a "new age": "It seems to me that we are entering a new age. The age of Western dominance is over and the future of the World lies not in Western Europe and America but in Asia, Africa and Latin America."³⁰⁸ This "new age", then, implies more than merely a shift of consciousness.

It may here be asked whether Bede personally sought to identify with what has commonly been known as the New Age movement. A passage from *A New Vision of Reality* shows Bede's approach to this issue:

Many people today anticipate a great advance in humanity and I think that is perfectly right, as we shall see. In many respects we can look forward to a great advance but I think we also have to look back. We have to recognise that the summit was achieved in those centuries before Christ, and that with the coming of Christ the final fulfilment of this experience of ultimate Reality was reached.³⁰⁹

A little later in the text Bede elaborates on what he anticipates to be the "patterns of the new age",³¹⁰ which includes such elements as an organic understanding of nature, an integral educational system, the use of alternative approaches to medicine and a new type of human community.³¹¹ Yet the most important aspect of this new age, its very foundation, is Christ and the Resurrection:

He transcends matter at both the gross and the subtle levels and enters the spiritual level and, with that transformation, the matter of this universe is taken up into the Godhead. That is the Christian mystery. It is amazing when we begin to grasp it, that the matter which explodes in the so-called Big Bang fifteen or even twenty billion years ago at that point was finally transfigured. In fact the transfiguration has been going on all through history and we ourselves are involved in this transformation of matter, as consciousness working in matter. The Christian understanding is that in Jesus consciousness finally took possession of matter, and this means that matter was spiritualized. In him the matter of the universe was, in other words, made totally conscious and became one with God, in the Godhead.³¹²

Bede then goes on to differentiate Christ's resurrection from various aspects of Vedanta.

Firstly, "the soul of Jesus"³¹³ did not disappear after the Ascension, a doctrine Bede opposes

³⁰⁸ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 151.

³⁰⁹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 281.

³¹⁰ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 281.

³¹¹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 281-286.

³¹² Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 167-68.

³¹³ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 168.

to Shankara's notion that "the *jivatman* disappears at death."³¹⁴ Secondly, in Christ creation "does not disappear but is transfigured, and that is exactly what St Paul means by the New Creation."³¹⁵ And as is the case with Christ, neither does the individual soul "merge in the Godhead like a drop of water into the ocean as is sometimes said, but we enter the Godhead."³¹⁶

Of course, the fact that Bede identifies differences between Christianity and non-Christian beliefs does not necessarily mean that his theological project does not share several notions prevalent in the New Age movement, such as some of the "patterns of the new age" just described. In a passage where it is not clear whether he is expressing his personal understanding of Bede's spirituality, or Bede's own approach to this issue, Teasdale states that Bede

had announced the dawning of a new age, which was not the popular notion of the New Age movement but really the opening to an integral humanism that brought together all the religions/spiritualities, science, and mysticism with the concern for the earth and the indigenous wisdom traditions.³¹⁷

A more detailed discussion of this issue remains outside the scope of this dissertation.

Summing up, Bede's use of the term "new age" is placed within the context of his Christological understanding, even if it may contain elements common to the New Age movement. It is in Christ (who is, in Bede's theology, the source of all religions, as we shall see in the next chapter), all dualities, such as the one between Christianity and Hinduism will be resolved, as summarised in the final paragraph of *The Marriage of East and West*:

When Christ will appear in glory, it will not be in any earthly form or in any manner we can conceive. 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face;' and we shall only 'appear in glory', when we have died to ourselves and become a 'new creation'. Then alone shall we encounter the fullness of truth and reality which is also the fullness of wisdom and knowledge and the fullness of bliss and love. Then only will the final marriage take place, of East and West, of man and woman, of matter and mind, of time and eternity.³¹⁸

8.5. The Uniqueness of Christian Faith

The eagerness to identify parallels between Christianity and Hinduism is common to all of Bede's writings, yet such a comparison is never done in a systematic manner prior to *A New Vision of Reality*, where we are presented with two lucid passages in which Bede provides a

³¹⁴ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 168.

³¹⁵ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 169.

³¹⁶ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 173.

³¹⁷ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 204.

³¹⁸ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 204.

summary of doctrines and notions he perceives as setting Christianity apart from Hinduism, worth quoting at length:

So this love of God is totally expressed in the love of our neighbour. Love of God and love of neighbour can never be separated. Comparing this with *bhakti* in Hinduism, *bhakti* is always a personal relationship to God, a self-transcendence, going beyond and being one with God, but, although the relation to the neighbour is certainly there, it is not normally expressed. It is an experience of identity, not of relationship. The relationship to the neighbour is implicit but not explicit, whereas in the Christian context the relation to the neighbour is always explicit and fundamental. And so it is an experience of God in the Spirit which brings this experience of being of one heart and one soul with others, and this then spreads out into daily life in the sharing of the goods of the world. These three aspects characterise the Christian mystical experience in the New Testament.³¹⁹

While this passage primarily deals with *bhakti* and the emphasis on charity expressed in the New Testament, at the end of the chapter “Christian Mysticism in Relation to Eastern Mysticism” towards the end of *A New Vision of Reality*, Bede provides five “points about Christian mysticism as a whole.”³²⁰ To my knowledge this is the only place in his writings where Bede sums up his understanding the distinctiveness of Christianity on what he considers to be the very fundamental issues of theology in a structured manner:

[1]First of all it embraces all creation, matter, life, time, history, man, woman. The whole of humanity is taken up in Christ into the life of the Godhead and is restored to unity. ... [2] Secondly, creation is not a fall and it is not God. Creation is often said to be a fall ... but in the Christian view this is not so. ... [3]Thirdly, the spirit of man is a capacity for God. It is not God. My *atman*, my self, is not God ... [4] Fourthly, this capacity is fully realised in Jesus in the resurrection, and so made effective in the Church and the sacraments. [5] Fifthly, the human person is not lost in the divine but enjoys perfect oneness in love. Again and again the tendency is to lose the person in the Ultimate. In both Hinduism and Buddhism this tendency is always at work, so that ultimately there is no individual left and everything dissolves into the pure oneness of being. ... Perhaps the fundamental difference is this: that the heart of Christian mysticism is a mystery of love, whereas both in Hinduism and Buddhism it is primarily a transformation of consciousness. *Brahman* is *saccidananda*, being, consciousness and bliss. It is not specifically love. Love is included, and was marvellously developed as *bhakti*, but this is not so central either in Hinduism or in Buddhism, whereas the essence of the Christian experience is an experience of love, not primarily of consciousness or of knowledge, though these, of course, are included, and love is self-communication.³²¹

The second point may be of particular relevance in regards to Bede’s presentation of Vedanta, since it not only implies the rejection of Shankara’s monism but also what Bede perceives as pantheistic leanings in the teachings of Ramanuja (insofar as Ramanuja sees creation as an extension of God). Trapnell identifies these two elements, monism and pantheism, as “extremes” in Hindu thought that Bede seeks to avoid.³²² While points three and five perhaps do not contradict ideas found in Vaishnava Vedanta, this summary shows how Bede sees

³¹⁹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 221-22.

³²⁰ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 251-52.

³²¹ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 252-53.

³²² Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 95.

Christian theology as fundamentally distinct from Vedanta (including both its theistic and monistic currents) on several fundamental issues. Yet while Advaita Vedanta differs from Christianity on all of these points, in his next book Bede will again present this non-theistic system as being of great importance for contemporary Christian theology.

9. Christ, Trinity and Syncretism: *The New Creation in Christ*

The New Creation in Christ is the last of Bede's works to be analysed in this dissertation. Published in 1992 with the subtitle *Meditation and Community*, this rather short book consists of talks given at the John Main seminar in 1991, as edited by Robert Kiely and Laurence Freeman. Bede held the Benedictine monk John Main in high regard for his method of meditation; in particular, his use of a mantra as a meditative tool appealed to Bede.³²³ Meditative practices were the focal point in Bede's talks, but the context is, as always, his personal engagement with the Hindu-Christian encounter.

9.1. Syncretism

The final chapter of *The New Creation in Christ* contains Bede's answers to questions raised by members of the audience, and this is one of the very few places in Bede's writings where the question of syncretism is dealt with at any length. Bede elaborates on this issue to his (supposedly predominantly Christian) audience in three different passages. In one of these he even warns that "it is no good being too ecumenical or we become syncretists."³²⁴ Referring to an example he used repeatedly, Bede defines syncretism and describes how it can be avoided as follows:

I like the illustration of fingers and the palm of the hand. The fingers represent Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Buddhism is miles from Christianity, and each has its own position. If you try to mix them, taking a bit of Hinduism or Buddhism and adding it to Christianity, that is syncretism. But if you go deeply into any one tradition you converge on a centre, and there you see how we all come forth from a common root. And you find how we meet people on the deeper level of their faith in the profound unity behind all our differences.³²⁵

While Bede's reflections on syncretism are presented as advice to fellow Christians, they may also be read as a description of his own attempts at a Hindu-Christian understanding. Sharing from his own experience, Bede informs the audience how "[i]t has been our experience in the ashram that the more we open ourselves to the other religions, to Hinduism in particular, the deeper our Christian faith grows."³²⁶ On the other hand, Bede warns that many Hindus have submitted to the danger of syncretism: "Most Hindus I know are syncretists; they think it is all the same whether you believe in Jesus, Krishna, Rama or Buddha. We are not syncretists like

³²³ Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ: Meditation and Community* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1992), ix.

³²⁴ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 87.

³²⁵ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 96-7.

that, but we do believe that each religion has its own unique value and insights which we need to share with one another.”³²⁷ We will return to analyse Bede’s description of the Hindu engagement in the interfaith dialogue and Hindu objections to his ecumenism in the conclusion.

9.2. Hinduism and Buddhism reconsidered

Despite Bede’s warnings against syncretism as something to be avoided for participants in ecumenical work, it may be asked whether he comes close to the syncretism of which he warns his audience. In a brief passage on Buddhism, its ontology is described as follows: “Theirs is a concept of absolute oneness: God, the soul, and the universe are experienced as a total unity in which no differences appear. This has been the experience of countless saints and sages from the earliest times to the present.”³²⁸ Bede states that “this is not our way of putting things”, but only ten pages later the Buddhist ontology is equated with its Hindu counterpart, when Bede describes the “unseen reality” behind the physical world:

Every religious tradition has a word for this unseen reality. In India we have *Brahman*. That is what is behind all phenomena, the one everlasting *Brahman*. And behind the human body, there is *Atman*, the one self. The Buddha called it *nirvana* when all phenomena pass away. There is a ‘blowing out’ of all appearances, all change and becoming, and one enters the Eternal Reality.³²⁹

Although this is not exactly the “mix” of religious traditions that Bede defines as syncretism, it certainly comes close. Bede has previously pointed out the difference between Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta; in *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, for example, he commented on Shankara that “[h]e was strongly opposed to the Buddhist doctrine of the void (*sunya*), which was present at his time and which to many may seem almost identical with his own.”³³⁰ In *Return to the Centre*, on the other hand, the Vedantic experience was described as similar to the Buddhist:

This is the experience of the Self, the Atman, beyond being in so far as being is an object of thought, beyond thought in so far as thought is a reflection, a concept of being. It is pure awareness of being, pure delight in Being – *saccidananda*, being, knowledge, bliss. It is Nirvana, the ultimate State, the supreme Wisdom, beyond which it is impossible to go. ‘O wisdom, gone, gone, gone beyond, gone to the other shore.’³³¹

³²⁶ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 96.

³²⁷ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 106.

³²⁸ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 62.

³²⁹ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 72.

³³⁰ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 124.

Elsewhere in *Return to the Centre*, Bede again distinguished between the “Nirvana of Brahman” (i.e. the *brahma nirvana* of the *Bhagavad Gita*) and the Buddhist concept of Nirvana in a discussion on whether they may both be described as referring to “an impersonal state.”³³² Similarly, *River of Compassion* also contains a long passage on the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, described as distinct from the Hindu understanding of the same term.³³³

It is certainly true that Buddhism and Hinduism share the use of religious terms, to which they ascribe different meanings. Similarly, the terms shared by the two traditions may be given different interpretations within the various schools of the two religious traditions; interpretations which also tend to change over the course of time. The quotations from Bede’s early works presented above shows that he was well aware of such variations, yet in *The New Creation in Christ* Bede is both eager to point out the dangers of syncretism, while the meaning of terms such as *brahman* and *nirvana* (as defined in Hinduism and Buddhism respectively) are at the same time said to be identical—or at least to refer to the same reality.

It may be pointed out that *The Creation in Christ* consists of lectures given to a specific audience and that Bede’s comments on the issue at hand are both few and limited in scope. However, this is just one of several quotations from Bede’s works that display inaccuracies which to some regard misrepresent the general tenets of the religious traditions being described.

It may be that a later Mahayana interpretation of *nirvana* is similar to an Advaitin or Vaishnava interpretation of *brahman*, but—as Bede has himself stated in his writings—Shankara certainly presented his own understanding of *brahman* as distinct from, if not directly opposed to, the Buddhist understanding of the ultimate reality (as perceived by Bede). Without allowing for such distinctions, Bede is in effect summarizing the beliefs held by various faiths in such a way that his exposition lacks accuracy—an accuracy that might be expected in light of his warnings against syncretism.

We have seen how Bede used the example of “the hand and the fingers”, where the fingers extend from the same hand, which is their common ground, as it were. Similarly, in *River of Compassion* Bede seems to draw a divide between the world religions, for “The Buddhist *nirvana* and the Hindu *moksha* are not the same, nor are they the same as the Christian vision of God.”³³⁴ Yet on the very same page of *River of Compassion*, Bede goes on to state that “the

³³¹ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 25. The quotation included at the end of this is identified by Bede as being quoted from the *Prajñāparamitahridaya Sutra*.

³³² Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 121.

³³³ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 96-97.

³³⁴ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 130.

Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian are all experiencing the ultimate Reality but experiencing it in different ways....”³³⁵ This notion is also found in *Return to the Centre*:

This is the mystery upon which both Indian and Chinese thought lighted in the sixth century before Christ. They called it Brahman, Atman, Nirvana, Tao, but these are only names for what cannot be named. We speak of ‘God’, but this also is only a name for this inexpressible Mystery.³³⁶

In the passage quoted above from *The New Creation in Christ* on the example of the hand, Bede stated that “if you go deeply into any one tradition you converge on a centre, and there you see how we all come forth from a common root.” While Buddhism and Upanishadic speculation emerged around the same time and in a similar milieu, it is also true that the Advaita school of Vedanta arose more than a millennium later, with a clear critique of the Buddhist ontology as one of its defining characteristics. It is mainly to this particular school of Vedanta (as well as the later theistic schools of Vedanta, which are even more outspoken in their criticism of Buddhism) Bede refers when seeking an authentic understanding of “orthodox” Hinduism. Insofar as Vedanta develops as a reaction to Buddhist doctrine, how can it be said to converge with Buddhism? This question is unanswered by Bede.

The argument that doctrine and theology belong to the world of signs is reiterated in *The New Creation*:

As long as we are in the way of ritual and doctrine, we are all fighting one another. But when we get beyond ritual and doctrine, which are signs (and necessary in their own way) to the mystery itself, then we touch the point of human unity where religions can be reconciled. We are here to reconcile religious conflicts in the world. It is a terrible responsibility.³³⁷

The Buddhist and Hindu traditions have shared Bede’s conviction that there is a deeper mystery which is “beyond ritual and doctrine” since the era of the Upanishads. Similarly, a refined (and at times heated) discourse between the two religions, as well as internalised discussions between different schools within both Buddhism and Hinduism have been ongoing for centuries. Would it, for example, from the perspective of Advaita or Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, be adequate to describe the difference between these two schools—not to speak of the difference between Vedanta and Buddhism—as merely belonging to the world of signs, as being merely “ritual and doctrine”?

³³⁵ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 130.

³³⁶ Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, 21.

³³⁷ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 64-65.

Within Vedanta the adherence to theism or non-theism, that is, a personal versus an impersonal understanding of *brahman*, is *the* fundamental divide; indeed, the exact understanding of *brahman* as taught within the various Vedantic traditions was so important as to be reflected in the very names that are normally used to identify the schools of Vedanta. Such a definite and fundamental doctrinal divide is not present within orthodox Christian theology after the time of the Christological schisms of the early Church. Of course there has been a certain tension between cataphatic and apophatic theology within Christianity from the time of the Church Fathers and Mothers, as well as divisive disagreements between the different confessions. Yet this has not caused a discord similar to the one found between the Vedantic systems; cataphatic and apophatic elements are coexistent in Christian theology, while the disagreement on how to describe the soul and its relation to the ultimate reality is in effect a fundamental divide between Buddhism, Advaita and theistic Vedanta.

9.3. Trinity and Advaita: Further Elaborations

The strong emphasis on science and its relation to religion found in *The New Vision of Reality* is not repeated in *The New Creation*, which is in this regard more similar to Bede's previous publications. And just like in his earlier works, the notions of Trinity and *advaita* are of primary interest. Bede defies, or rather seeks to transcend, traditional disagreements on how God may best be described: "Trinity is the essence, the very ground of all Christian existence. It is not one person. It is the communion of love. The traditional way to express this is that God is found in relationship."³³⁸ This relationship, however, is not *impersonal*, but rather *interpersonal*. This is said to be a corrective to the common understanding of the Trinity, for "in the Christian tradition God is not 'a' person. God is interpersonal communion, a communion of love which is in all of us and embraces us all as the real meaning for our lives."³³⁹

For Bede this Trinitarian mystery is comprehensible through non-discursive contemplation, "where the mind rests in silence in the presence of God,"³⁴⁰ a stage that is beyond pious devotionism, whether Christian or Hindu:

The next stage, though, is to open our hearts in love to this transcendent reality and to find the mystery of love at the heart of our being. That is our particular Christian calling. For the Hindu this is the way of *bhakti*, or devotion to a personal God. But the danger in this is that God is normally represented in human form as Rama, Krishna, Shiva or some other god or goddess. The mystery of God tends to be limited once it is given

³³⁸ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 95.

³³⁹ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 6.

³⁴⁰ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 10.

a particular personal form, whether it is the guru or a god. There is a similar danger for Christians in focusing excessively on the human nature of Jesus, in what the fathers called ‘the anthropomorphical blasphemy’.³⁴¹

A little later in the text, Bede defines the Christian concept of God as follows: “The Father is the Origin, the Source, the One beyond name and form. Jesus gives him name and form but the Father himself is what in India is call [sic] *arupa*, without name or form.”³⁴² A similar distinction would be quite difficult within theistic Vedanta, where the *nama-rupa* aspect of the Divine is of crucial importance, whether through the invocation of the divinity’s name through recital of mantras or through *puja* offered to the divinity’s *murti*, or within the context of the Vaishnava theological discourse. Similarly, *guru-bhakti* plays an important role within Vaishnava Vedanta, especially within the system of Nimbarka, where devotion to the guru is pivotal for salvation. Incidentally, the role of the guru within Hinduism is not discussed at any great length in any of Bede’s books, nor is it presented as being of particular relevance for Christianity, except for a passage in *The Cosmic Revelation* where Bede claims that there is a need for “Christian gurus who can not merely teach catechism, but can communicate the knowledge of Christ.”³⁴³ Neither, for that matter, is *puja* or recitals of mantras given any particular attention in Bede’s writings, even though he acknowledges the importance of Sanskrit as a holy language on several occasions throughout his works.³⁴⁴

In *The New Creation in Christ*, the relational aspect of the Trinity is linked to Advaita Vedanta in a somewhat unclear passage: “God and the soul are ‘not two’. Shankara did not say that God and the soul are the same, but that they are not two; they exist in a transcendental relationship ... According to Shankara, there is no duality at all and, therefore, the personal God rather fades away.”³⁴⁵ How a relationship can exist if “there is no duality at all” remains unsaid, but the importance of *advaita* as such is upheld, for while some forms of *advaita* “are not at all satisfactory ... the idea of *advaita*, non-duality is fundamental to Christian understanding today.”

9.4. The Cosmic Christ

A crucial element in Bede’s theological system which is particularly relevant for his understanding of Christianity’s relationship with other religions is the Cosmic Christ, a topic

³⁴¹ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 10-11.

³⁴² Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 11.

³⁴³ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 64.

³⁴⁴ See, for example, Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 26: “Sanskrit, above all perhaps, is a sacred language.”

that is also elaborated on earlier than in *The New Creation in Christ*. Answering the question “[w]ho is the Cosmic Christ?” asked by a member of the audience, Bede replies that he thinks “it is helpful to speak of the cosmic revelation. There are two stages of revelation. It began before Christ in a cosmic religion.”³⁴⁶ In the cosmic religion “God is seen to be in the earth and in the whole creation. The cosmic Christ, then, is our belief that Christ himself goes beyond space and time, is totally one with the Father, the creator-God, and so is also present in all creation.”³⁴⁷ Bede then goes on to elaborate on some of St Paul’s most famous words: “‘In him and through him and for him all things are created and in him all things hold together.’ The whole universe holds together in Christ: that is the cosmic Christ. It needs to be said that Christ is present in all religion.”³⁴⁸ While “cosmic religion” predates Christianity, it too proceeds from Christ.

Based on this aspect of Pauline theology, Bede is able to conclude that not only is Christ *present* in the world religions, but “Christ is ultimately the source of all religion. He is behind it all.”³⁴⁹ In answer to how non-Christians can be redeemed, Bede maintains that “[t]he grace of Christ is present in some way to every human being from the beginning to the end. Normally it comes through their traditional religion.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁵ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 57.

³⁴⁶ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 95.

³⁴⁷ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 96.

³⁴⁸ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 96.

³⁴⁹ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 97.

³⁵⁰ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 99.

Conclusion

And now finally, what is the practical answer to this? How shall we transcend dualism?
That is our problem ... All these religious divisions stem from the philosophy of dualism.
—Bede Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, p. 90.

In the preceding chapters of this dissertation I have presented a chronological survey of what I consider to be the most important issues discussed in Bede's writings on Vedanta and Hinduism. I will now, based on this survey (and in the context of the questions raised in the introduction) address some general aspects of Bede's theology which affect his presentation of Hinduism. Finally, I will end my dissertation with some concluding remarks.

The Structure of Bede's Presentation of Hinduism

We have seen how Bede not only seeks to compare Hinduism with Christianity; an equally important aspect of his engagement with Hinduism is the attempt to incorporate concepts and terms from Vedanta into his own theological project. This second aspect of Bede's approach to Hinduism occurs within the context of Christian theology—Bede always considers Hinduism from the perspective of a Catholic monk who finds the appropriation of Hinduism to be enriching for his own theological understanding. How is this approach reflected in Bede's presentation of Hinduism?

To some extent it is problematic to speak of Bede as using "strategies" in his description of Hinduism. He is not an apologetic theologian or a missionary who wants to convert his readers to Catholic Christianity—his works contain no "hidden agenda" traceable by a scrutiny of his writings. Neither does Bede want to belittle Hinduism; indeed he emphasises the importance of Hinduism for Christians in all of his works, ranging from *The Golden String* to *The New Creation in Christ*. In my understanding Bede seeks to make a fair and balanced presentation of Hinduism, based on extensive personal studies. Yet, as we have seen, in many cases his exposition of Vedanta is formulated in such a way that certain passages are not representative of Vedanta in its full breadth, or as it is traditionally understood; it lacks important nuances—some of which Bede was well aware of, as these nuances were often discussed previously in his oeuvre. It is in this particular, methodological sense of the word I will discuss "strategies" in Bede's presentation of Hinduism.

Based on my analysis of Bede's writings I think it is useful to distinguish between six such strategic factors that influence his presentation of Hinduism on a fundamental level. The first of these, Bede's *shifting and sometimes unclear use of categories* by means of which he seeks to structure his presentation may be summarised as follows:

I. Sometimes Hinduism is presented as *one* religion with a singular approach to a particular issue. This alleged Hindu understanding is then evaluated from the perspective of Bede's own theological understanding, and accordingly "Hinduism" is described as either in agreement with or at odds with Christianity, instead of providing a plethora of different perspectives on any single topic. Similarly (even though this affects his presentation of Vedanta to a lesser degree) Bede sometimes treats Christianity as a unified religious phenomenon without distinguishing between his private opinions, the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the theology of other Christian confessions.

II. A variant of the presentation of Hinduism as a unified religion is to present Hinduism as containing several traditions, yet as culminating in a particular tradition. For example, Advaita Vedanta is often said to provide the most profound insight of Hinduism. In this way Bede presents what is in effect a gradation of various Hindu traditions, thus arriving at a presentation of Hinduism which would only be acceptable to adherents of the particular Hindu tradition which he perceives as presenting the most authentic understanding of any given issue.

III. At times terms such as Vedanta, Hinduism, "the East" and "Cosmic revelation" are used interchangeably, or the distinction between them is not clearly identified. Similarly the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism is often blurred (or presented as of limited or no relevance).

IV. Christianity is sometimes referred to as "the West", such as in the very title *The Marriage of East and West*, and as such the two (Hinduism and Christianity, "East" and "West") are presented as opposites. While it falls outside the scope of this dissertation to discuss this dichotomy in Bede's writings in the context of Orientalism at any length, it is worth noticing that Bede often structures his presentation of Hinduism by contrasting it with Christianity and the "West", and that for Bede this is, as we have seen, not just a question of rhetorics: "People in the West are dominated by the conscious mind ... But in the East people live not from the conscious mind but from the unconscious, from the body not from the mind."³⁵¹ This might fit well with Edward Said's statement that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an

³⁵¹ Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, 8.

ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”,³⁵² just like Bede’s expression that he went to India “to find the other half of his soul” might resonate with Said’s description of Orientalism as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience.”³⁵³

The second set of factors to influence Bede’s writings of Hinduism is *the structuring of his presentation*. As I have tried to show, Bede’s analysis of Hinduism sometimes suffers from a lack of consistency and lucidness. Examples of this includes the frequent shift between different terms used to describe the same phenomenon; simplifications that lack nuances and sometimes come close to oversimplifications, if not misrepresentations; generalisations of important aspects of Hindu beliefs and approximate, sometimes hazy descriptions or categorisations of Hindu beliefs. This lack of structure affects Bede’s attempt to compare Hinduism and Christianity, since several of his comparisons are only made possible by the use of such simplifications and generalisations. Furthermore the structure of Bede’s theological project is affected by the fact that he only rarely refers to ideas presented in his previous works; neither does he elaborate on the continuity and development of his approach to Vedanta.

The third factor to affect Bede’s presentation is his *reinterpretation of Hinduism*, which is in some cases not representative of Hindu beliefs. When such reinterpretations are in turn compared to Christianity so as to make the two systems of belief seem compatible (or incompatible, for that matter), it is sometimes the case that his comparison is not based on a factual understanding of Hinduism, but rather an attempt at a synthesis between the two, based on premises that are not always correct.

In this context of the third factor just mentioned it may be useful to refer to a question raised in Fastiggi and Pereira’s article on Bede’s engagement with Hinduism: “does Griffiths succeed in his effort at religious integration or does he create a theological hybrid, which is neither authentically Hindu nor Christian?”³⁵⁴ In her biography Shirley du Boulay refers to a review of *The Marriage of East and West* written by Ursula King, who describes the book as “an example of “soft thinking”, lacking the very union of critical analysis and unifying synthesis it wishes to propound,” calling “the terms of marriage proposal simplistic, if not to say myopic.”³⁵⁵ In my study of *The New Creation in Christ* I have pointed out at least one

³⁵² Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 2.

³⁵³ Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

³⁵⁴ Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, “The Swami from Oxford”, http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=3427 (last accessed 04-24-2007).

³⁵⁵ Ursula King, *The Clergy Review*, September 1983, quoted in du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 209.

instance where Bede comes close to the very syncretism about which he warns his readers repeatedly in the same book.

While it is not of immediate relevance for my dissertation to discuss if Bede's approach to Hinduism may best be characterised as ecumenism, synthesis, syncretism, or as a "hybrid", to use Pereira and Fastiggi's term, Bede's understanding that *terms from different religious traditions refer to the same spiritual phenomenon* is a fourth factor in his presentation of Hinduism. As I will try to show below, this is related to Bede's understanding of the different religions as referring to one absolute truth.

As far as I know Bede never sought to undertake a comprehensive comparison of Hinduism and Christianity as complex systems of belief. Rather, throughout his writings he deals with particular aspects of these religious traditions, which implies a selective approach to Hinduism and Vedanta. While Bede never sought to offer a schematic presentation of all the Vedantic systems in their full complexity (except for the fairly brief and summary analysis found in *Vedanta and Christian Faith*), a fifth and important aspect of his presentation is the *omission of important details* in the description of Hinduism and Vedanta. This occurs, for example, in *A New Vision of Reality*, where Bede presents several non-Vedantic traditions as a corrective to the lack of differentiation in Shankara's interpretation of *saccidananda*, at the same time omitting to mention the many Vaishnava traditions that oppose Shankara's monistic tendencies within the Vedantic discourse.

A sixth strategy in Bede's presentation of Hinduism is his *use of contradictions*. An example of this is the presentation of *tantra* and Vedanta as contradictory currents in Hindu spirituality in *A New Vision of Reality*, with no mention of the synthesis of elements from Vedanta as well as from *tantra* which occurs in Vaishnavism. In several cases the use of contradictions leaves out the very complexity and richness of Hinduism and Vedanta; if this complexity was taken into consideration, it would not have been possible for Bede to arrive at some of his conclusions about Hinduism, such as in the example just mentioned. By presenting *tantra* and Vedanta as opposites it is possible for Bede to call for a synthesis between the two, without taking into consideration how such a synthesis might have already been accomplished.

The above summary is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight the most important aspects of the strategies used by Bede in his presentation of Vedanta and Hinduism. Several of the passages discussed in my dissertation may be fitted into several of these categories, which are sometimes necessarily hazy. For example, Bede's assertion in *A New Vision of*

Reality that “what distinguishes the Christian experience of God from that of the Hindu” is that “[t]he Hindu in his deepest experience of *advaita* knows God in an identity of being,”³⁵⁶ may imply either that Advaita Vedanta is the supreme form of Hinduism (and not just the supreme form of Vedanta), or that Hinduism is a single, unified religious tradition. It also implies a contradiction between Christianity and Hinduism, in that Bede does not take into account the existence of numerous theistic traditions within Hinduism which would certainly not agree that the soul and God are identical.

Bede Under Scrutiny

In the biographical sketch of Bede found in chapter one it was pointed out how Bede was criticised by local Church authorities. For the most part such criticism dealt with questions of liturgy, organisation and ecclesiastical matters, and only to a lesser degree theology as such. According to du Boulay, in part such criticism of Bede and his ashram came from “the local press and from extreme conservative Catholics who felt that it was undermining the Church.”³⁵⁷ Du Boulay furthermore points out how Bede received support from the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre in Bangalore as well as from the local archbishop.³⁵⁸ Such criticism from Indian Catholics of Bede’s theology is not dealt with at any length in the monographs of either Trapnell or Teasdale.

In her biography on Bede, Spink refers to a talk given by John Paul II during his visit to India in 1986, in which he stressed the importance not only of dialogue, but also inculturation³⁵⁹—terms which may be used to describe Bede’s own efforts. In the entry on inculturation found in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, it is pointed out how “The Second Vatican Council initiated serious efforts toward inculturation,” which is in part defined as “the process by which the gospel is adapted to a particular culture.”³⁶⁰

Paradoxically, according to Trapnell Bede’s attempts at inculturation might have made him less enthusiastic about engaging in actual dialogue with Hindus in his later years, because of the rather heated response his efforts received from “conservative Hindus.”³⁶¹ Such criticism is also referred to by du Boulay, who describes a debate lasting for several months initiated by a letter published in *Indian Express* newspaper, in which Bede was harshly condemned for appropriating the use of the *Om* symbol in connection with the Christian cross, as well as for

³⁵⁶ Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 220.

³⁵⁷ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 162.

³⁵⁸ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 163-65.

³⁵⁹ Spink, *Sense of the Sacred*, 190.

³⁶⁰ *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 660.

not receiving the *kavi* from a Hindu *samnyasin* (but rather a Catholic metropolitan), as it is normally done.³⁶² According to du Boulay, this exchange “upset [Bede] deeply.”³⁶³ Fastiggi and Pereira also discuss this exchange of letters, which they claim undermines some of the premises for Bede’s attempts at inculturation at Shantivanam.

Fastiggi and Pereira refer to how Bede in one of his letters stated that most contemporary Hindus would agree to his notion that there is a “hidden mystery” to be found “at the heart of all religion.”³⁶⁴ Bede refers to Aurobindo, Ramana Maharishi, and Gandhi as sharing this notion, stating that “I consider myself a Christian in religion but a Hindu in spirit, just as they were Hindus in religion while being Christian in spirit.”³⁶⁵ Fastiggi and Pereira take objection to this statement:

What does Griffiths mean by all this? Being a “Hindu in spirit” and a “Christian in spirit” either mean the same thing or mean different things. If they mean the same thing, then Griffiths is preaching the theosophical unity of faiths and cannot be considered a Christian, at least in the orthodox sense. If they mean different things, then Griffiths, who says that he is a “Hindu in spirit,” is not a Christian by his own confession. Griffiths seems to place “religion” in opposition to “spirit.” Yet, in all his writings, he constantly uses Christian language to interpret Hindu concepts and Hindu language to interpret Christian concepts. What, then, does Griffiths represent? Is he promoting a Christianized Neo-Hinduism or a Hinduized Neo-Christianity?³⁶⁶

Fastiggi and Pereira’s article is one of the few attempts at criticism of the validity of Bede’s writings on Hinduism as representative of Catholicism. Both Catholics, Pereira is a professor of theology and Fastiggi a professor of religious studies. For our purpose their article is first of all significant for its criticism of Bede’s method, yet their conclusions about the validity of Bede’s writings as expressions of Catholic theology may also be noted, insofar as their criticism highlights how Bede’s theology is influenced by Vedanta and Hinduism.

Religious Unity?

We have seen how Bede quite early in his writings moved from the fulfilment theory to an understanding of Hinduism and Christianity as complementary. From *Return to the Centre* onwards Bede understood religion to be historically and culturally conditioned. This understanding allowed for what may be labelled a mystical approach to religion in Bede’s

³⁶¹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 119.

³⁶² Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 211-13.

³⁶³ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 213.

³⁶⁴ A letter by Bede Griffiths, quoted in Fastiggi and Pereira.

³⁶⁵ A letter by Bede Griffiths, quoted in Fastiggi and Pereira.

³⁶⁶ Fastiggi and Pereira.

writings: religious language is said to be limiting, and even if it is of great value it is always surpassed by authentic experience.

Another important aspect of Bede's theology initially expressed in *Return to the Centre* is the understanding that all religion refers to the same absolute reality—"the goal of each religion is the same."³⁶⁷ Even if he acknowledged the plurality of religious doctrine as being necessary, the significance of this plurality is limited for Bede, and it is generally explained in the context of the notion that the same absolute reality is reflected in all religions. This aspect of Bede's theology is particularly evident in his criticism of Zaehner's commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, as discussed in my analysis of *River of Compassion*; here we saw how Bede disagreed with Zaehner's statements to the effect that Buddhism and the *Bhagavad Gita* refer not only to different spiritual *experiences* of, but indeed to different *descriptions* of the absolute reality. For Bede the difference between the Hindu *brahman* and the Buddhist *nirvana* appeared to be of little significance, and as we have seen he would not agree with Zaehner's conclusion that the concept of *brahman* expounded in the *Bhagavad Gita* excels or goes beyond the Buddhist concept of *nirvana*. This equation between Buddhism and Hinduism is expressed even more clearly in *The New Creation of Christ*, where the terms *brahman*, *atman* and *nirvana* are explicitly said to refer to the same experience of reality.

In my study of *A New Vision of Reality* I tried to show how this equation is contrary to Buddhism as well as Vedanta. Interestingly several of the Vedantic systems allow for a *gradation* of various levels of spiritual understanding; hence it is possible for adherents of Advaita Vedanta to describe the theistic experience of love and devotion as subordinate to the non-dual experience of *brahman*, yet as a beneficial spiritual exercise, and vice versa. For Bede this gradation is unacceptable—it is *equally valid to refer to brahman (i.e. the ultimate reality) as personal as it is to describe it as impersonal*. In my understanding Bede's position on this issue is exactly what pinpoints his own position in regards to the schools of Vedanta.

Bede's Vedantic Position

As previously mentioned, the understanding of the soul's relation to the absolute and the description given to the absolute are considered so important within the Vedantic discourse that the different Vedantic schools are generally referred to according to their position on these issues. While Shankara is generally understood as describing the relation between *atman* and *brahman* as devoid of any multiplicity, all the other Vedantic traditions sought to

³⁶⁷ Griffiths, *Return to the Source*, 74.

highlight a distinction between the two. To my knowledge Bede's understanding of the personal versus the impersonal understanding of the relationship between *atman* and *brahman* is not expressed in any of the traditional schools of Vedanta, with the possible exception of Nimbarka's *dvaitadvaita* and Caitanya's *bheda-abheda*, which we shall discuss presently. His conclusion on this issue thus sets Bede apart from the different schools of Vedanta on one of the most fundamental issues within the Vedantic discourse, and accordingly his conclusion would identify the premises of his attempts to formulate a novel and Christian approach to Vedanta.

Bede's conclusion on this issue in turn helps to shape his understanding of religion on a broader basis. While the Vedantic systems may allow for a gradation in which different theological positions can be said to express only certain aspects of the truth (such as the *advaitin* understanding that the worship of one's *ishtadeva* may be conducive for the eventual realisation of the unity between *atman* and *brahman*), in Bede's theological system such a gradation is absent. Not only is the religious discourse symbolical; it even relates to the same spiritual reality, which may, or may not be referred to as personal. Hence all religious experience (or at least the spiritual experience of all the major world religions) is authentic, and it is impossible to gradate religious experience according to such a scheme as implied by many of the Vedantic systems. Even if Bede perceived Hinduism as particularly important—due to of the depth of the intuitive wisdom of the Upanishads, its role as the paradigmatic “cosmic religion” or the *Bhagavad Gita*'s capacity to accommodate for impulses such as Vedanta, *samkhya* and Buddhism within the context of theism, as expressed in *River of Compassion*—for Bede this did not imply that Hinduism or Vedanta as such were any more “true” than Buddhism, only more relevant or stimulating for his theological project.

The Context of Bede's Vedanta

Bede's qualified approval of Shankara's non-dualism at times seems to go beyond conventional and dogmatic Catholic theology. Yet while Bede repeatedly emphasised the importance of Vedanta for Christian theology, an equally important aspect of the encounter he envisioned between the two was their meeting at a contemplative, non-discursive level. As we have seen, it is on this experiential level, beyond dogmatic schisms, that the “marriage” between Christianity and Hinduism was to take place.

In some sense this “marriage” implies moving beyond the confines of Catholicism. In their article on Bede's theology, Fastiggi and Pereira state that their “underlying intuition is that Griffiths reflects a theosophical rather than a Christian point of view”, referring to his

understanding of religion as symbolical, the use of terminology from Asian religious traditions as well as a desire to transcend dualism.³⁶⁸ Nevertheless it is clear that Bede continued to consider himself to be a Catholic, identifying the uniqueness of Christian belief in *A New Vision of Reality*. Furthermore, as we have seen, Christ always retained a pivotal role in his theology. Some aspects of Bede's Christology, as pertinent within the context of this dissertation, are summarised by Judson Trapnell:

“While *Christ* as the Truth may be said by Christians to be the fulfilment of all religions, *Christianity* cannot, Griffiths argued. This refinement of his understanding of who Christ is in relation to Christianity and other traditions is the key to his developing theory of complementarity and to his vision of the church as “an open society in dialogue.””³⁶⁹

Both du Boulay and Trapnell emphasise that while certain aspects of Bede's theology may appear controversial, he was never silenced or warned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as was the Jesuit Anthony de Mello, who received a warning from the Congregation due to ideas expressed in his extensive writings on Hinduism. To the contrary, it may perhaps rather be said that while Bede sought to remain orthodox as a Christian theologian, his presentation of *other* religious systems, in particular Vedanta, lacks the same attempt at orthodoxy he sought to adhere to in his treatment of Christian theology. Here we are again reminded of how Bede's presentation of Hinduism is part of his Christian theology; while Bede does not seek to compromise his own beliefs, he nevertheless adapts his presentation of Vedanta and Hinduism to serve various purposes within his theological project, as will be clear in my summary of Bede's presentation of *advaita*.

The Consistency of Bede's Approach to *Advaita*

We have seen how Advaita Vedanta and the notion of *advaita* remains a pivotal aspect of Bede's approach to Hinduism. In three important regards his attitude to *advaita* was re-worked at different times:

1. The exact position awarded to Advaita Vedanta in Bede's theology changed from outright rejection in the writings he published during the pre-Shantivanam era to a qualified acceptance in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* and *Return to the Centre* where he seemed to embrace a reinterpretation of Shankara's *advaita* based on the findings of the Catholic theologians de Smet and Grant as extremely relevant for contemporary Christianity. Finally,

³⁶⁸ The Swami From Oxford.

³⁶⁹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 186.

in his later works Bede identified what he perceived as shortcomings in Advaita Vedanta while still continuing to refer to *advaita* as the most relevant Vedantic notion.

2. Just as Bede's acceptance of Advaita Vedanta would continue to develop throughout his writings, he would also redefine *advaita*; in his earliest works Advaita Vedanta is described as fundamentally monistic, while in the intermediary period just described, Shankara was interpreted so as to not present a monistic system, but rather a system in which *brahman* was conceived as accommodating for a certain plurality. Later Bede would come to emphasise how personal existence, love and intercommunion was somehow lacking in the concept of *advaita*, while at the same time stressing that these notions are a crucial aspect of Christianity.

3. Finally Bede's presentation of Advaita Vedanta's position within Hinduism also underwent noteworthy changes. Early in his oeuvre Advaita Vedanta was merely identified as one of several schools of Vedanta, if perhaps more prominent than the other Vedantic traditions. Then, in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* and *Return to the Centre*, *advaita* (and to some extent, Advaita Vedanta) was presented as the culmination not only of Vedanta, but indeed of Hinduism, and as the Hindu representative of a non-dualism which was perceived as being the most profound insight of all the world religions. Later Bede would come to emphasise how all the Vedantic systems developed after Shankara objected to Advaita Vedanta, and accordingly his system would again be presented as merely one of several systems of Vedanta, which all provide a partial insight into the absolute—just as all other systems of religions do. Finally, in *A New Vision of Reality* (and, as we have seen, to some extent even earlier), *tantra* was said to be a corrective to the otherworldliness of Vedanta, including Advaita Vedanta.

As should be clear from this brief résumé of Bede's presentation of *advaita*, the tripartite chronological scheme I have outlined above may be used to describe not only how Bede would define, but also how he would assess and locate the role of *advaita* within Hinduism at any given time. This reflects a certain internal consistency between how Bede would address these three different aspects of his presentation of *advaita*.

Such correlations are also observed by Trapnell, who in an essay points to how “A chronological reading of Griffiths' writings reveals a close relationship between the stages of development in his mystical life and his positions on the status of non-Christian religions.”³⁷⁰ In his monograph on Bede, where he seeks to explore Bede's theological writings in a biographical context, Trapnell is even more specific, stating that “From 1968 on Griffiths's

³⁷⁰ Trapnell, *The Other Half of My Soul*, 206.

articulation of a Christian *advaita* and his experience of nonduality develop simultaneously.”³⁷¹ Such a psychologically oriented analysis is outside the scope of this thesis, whereas I have tried to show how his presentation of Vedanta is based on the general premises and goals of his theological project, and is changed accordingly to how these premises are modified.

This development may be summed up as follows: in his early works Bede would not ascribe any particular value to the actual doctrines of Advaita Vedanta, which was said to oppose Christianity, and as being merely one of several Vedantic traditions. According to Trapnell, this prompted Bede to formulate a Christian understanding of *advaita* during this period.³⁷² Later, during the intermediary period, as outlined above, Bede would define Advaita Vedanta as potentially parallel to the Christian understanding of God, at the same time assessing it as highly relevant for Christianity, as well as the ultimate achievement of Hinduism. Finally the conclusions of Advaita Vedanta was again regarded as partially untenable, since its doctrines were defined as too monistic—an understanding Bede substantiated by reference to how the other Vedantic schools criticised Shankara. This final approach resonated with Bede’s own emphasis on the interpersonal nature of the absolute during the same period.

As should be clear from this brief summary, Bede’s presentation of *advaita* undergoes a noteworthy development; at each stage there is a certain inner consistency between the elements of his presentation of *advaita* which also parallels other developments in his theological project. I will try to present some general conclusions regarding this correlation, which will hopefully also highlight why Bede continues to give preference to the notion of *advaita* throughout his writings.

The Paradox of Bede’s Approach to *Advaita*

How Bede could continue to criticise Advaita Vedanta due to its monistic overtones while simultaneously continuing to stress its significance may appear to be a paradox; to some extent this is resolved by Bede’s insistence that the Sanskrit term *advaita* does not necessarily imply that *atman* and *brahman* are one, but rather that they are “not two.” In Bede’s usage, then, *advaita* does not refer to monism so much as to non-dualism.

Non-dualism is one of the defining goals of Bede’s theological project, to some extent even more important than the more common distinctions between monism/non-theism and

³⁷¹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 163.

³⁷² Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 92.

theism. In his assessment of the world religions, for example, Bede operates with categories such as “historical” versus “cosmic” and “dual” versus “non-dual” religion rather than the conventional divide between theism and monism. Within this scheme both Vedanta and Christianity are often simply identified as “non-dual”, even though they both contain dual elements, such as Madhva’s *dvaita*, which is sometimes described by Bede as close to conventional Christian spirituality.³⁷³ The identification of Hinduism as fundamentally or essentially “non-dual” reflects how Bede would at times describe Hinduism as either a single system of belief or as a hierarchical arrangement of various elements, as described above.

But although some of the passages quoted from *Vedanta and Christian Faith* and *Return to the Centre* may seem to present an understanding of non-duality that comes very close to the generally accepted understanding of *advaita* as taught by Shankara, Bede never acknowledges the commonly accepted use of *advaita* without at the same time qualifying his support for it. Indeed, the *advaita* Bede presented as meaningful is a reinterpretation of *advaita* as it is understood in the system of Advaita Vedanta. This may be exemplified by reference to his support for Grant and de Smet’s interpretation of *advaita* from a Christian perspective, as expressed in *The Cosmic Revelation*.³⁷⁴

Based on his notion of a common truth reflected in Vedanta and Christianity, Bede does not primarily aim to study the *advaitin*’s definition of *advaita*, but rather to arrive at an understanding of *advaita* which may fit into his theological project. As we have seen, this implies supporting a modified or qualified version of *advaita*, one which is often at odds with how Shankara is generally understood.

In this regard it may be useful to remember how Bede would sometimes assess the descriptions of the absolute found in Advaita Vedanta as unsatisfactory when compared with the Trinity, in that the Trinity might be said to be both “non-dual” and “interpersonal.” Based on this understanding, Bede was able to assess that Christianity goes beyond not only Shankara, but also Vedanta and even Hinduism. Yet, as discussed above, with the possible exception of Madhva, all the Vaishnava systems of Vedanta acknowledge not only interrelatedness or intercommunion in the absolute, but also an interrelation between *atman* and *brahman* that is strongly opposed to monism. Thus, by describing Christianity as going beyond Vedanta (insofar as it acknowledges an interrelatedness said to be lacking in Shankara), Bede omits to take into consideration how several other Vedantic systems are in

³⁷³ See, for example, Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 57.

³⁷⁴ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 72.

agreement with Christianity on this issue. How may we best understand this aspect of Bede's presentation of Vedanta?

As we have seen, Bede never fully abandoned the notion that "pure oneness"³⁷⁵ or the understanding that *atman* and *brahman* are one was "the goal of Hinduism."³⁷⁶ Implicit in this conclusion is the understanding that while *bhakti* is both valuable in the context of Vedanta and Christianity, it is nevertheless surpassed by *advaita*—a notion which, as previously mentioned, is not descriptive of Hinduism by academic standards, or even representative of the understanding held by vast sections of the Hindu society. Again we are reminded of how Bede would sometimes use inaccurate simplifications in his presentation of Hinduism; in the passage the brief quotations above are excerpted from³⁷⁷, Bede reduces the Vaishnava schools of Vedanta to imperfect Vedantic systems that find fulfilment in the notion of *advaita*, and based on this particular presentation of Hinduism, he is then in turn able to show how Christianity not only surpasses Vedanta, but even Hinduism as such, insofar as Christianity is said to provide an understanding of the interrelatedness of God and the soul lacking in Advaita Vedanta.

It is on the basis of this preferential treatment of Shankara, then, that Bede presents Christianity as excelling Hinduism and Vedanta when it comes to the question of the nature of and relationship between man and God. This is not to say that Bede secretly perceived Vaishnava Vedanta as closer to Christianity; as we have seen in the extensive passages quoted at the end of our survey of *A New Creation in Christ*, Bede identified several tenets of Christian faith which he found to be lacking in Vaishnava Vedanta, especially regarding charity and the ontological understanding of creation. Furthermore, according to Trapnell Bede never considered Dvaita or Vishishtadvaita Vedanta as providing "a satisfactory answer to the fundamental quandary posed by the experience of nonduality, that is, the relationship between the divine mystery, the soul, and the world."³⁷⁸ Rather, my main point in this summary of Bede's assessment of Vedanta and Christianity is to show how some of the premises for his comparison of Vedanta and Christianity are based on a hierarchical or singular definition of Hinduism which is not only inaccurate by academic standards, but even with how Bede had presented the Vedantic systems as early as in *Vedanta and Christian Faith*.

³⁷⁵ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 130-31.

³⁷⁶ Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 130-31.

³⁷⁷ This passage is discussed above on page 51.

Finally it may be asked why Bede would continue to stress the importance of *advaita* while criticizing the *advaitin* understanding of the term. In regards to the criticism Bede received from certain Hindus discussed below, Trapnell even points out how Bede might be “guilty of spiritual colonialism” since he appropriated “the Hindu concept of *advaita* in his theologizing and then [criticised] Hindu understandings of that concept.”³⁷⁹ We will return to Bede’s many-faceted approach to Hinduism in the summary remarks below.

Insofar as Bede’s own understanding of *advaita* accommodated for a distinction between *atman* and *brahman* that are also expressed in Vaishnava Vedanta, the *advaita* promoted by Bede is a *modified* form of *advaita* dissimilar to Advaita Vedanta, and as such it may be said to resemble both Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita, Nimbarka’s Dvaitadvaita and Caitanya’s Bhedabheda; all of these Vedantic systems agree that while the *atman* is distinct from God, the two may also in a certain sense be described as one. Bede was well aware of this—in *River of Compassion* he even mentioned the *rasa* theology of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, in which the interrelatedness of *atman* and *bhagavan* is described in great detail.³⁸⁰

Based on my study of Bede’s writings it appears that the most prominent aspect of his presentation of *advaita* is the emphasis on the *experience* of non-duality, as opposed to *existential* non-duality, as generally is denoted by the term *advaita* in Vedantic usage.

Of course the difference between these two meanings of *advaita* is vast; and while the *experience* of non-duality is common to Christianity and most of the Vedantic systems, non-duality in the *existential* meaning of the term is found only in Advaita Vedanta, and such existential non-dualism was repeatedly rejected by Bede. The fact that he generally does not account for, or specify in what sense he uses the term non-duality influence the bulk of his writings on Vedanta—even though there are a few instances where Bede distinguishes between these different meanings of the term, such as a passage previously quoted from in *Christ in India*.³⁸¹

With a few exceptions (such as certain passages from *Vedanta and Christian Faith* and *Return to the Centre*), it is generally *experiential* non-dualism which is denoted by Bede’s use of the term. Yet by not accounting for such a distinction, it becomes possible for Bede to praise Vedanta due to the doctrine of *advaita*, while also stressing how Christianity makes “non-duality” meaningful by qualifying the term by focusing on the experiential aspects of non-duality. Only rarely does Bede stress that a similar reinterpretation of Shankara’s *advaita*

³⁷⁸ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 94.

³⁷⁹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 197.

³⁸⁰ Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 217.

is fundamental to Vaishnava Vedanta—i.e, the whole Vedantic discourse except for Shankara, and possibly Madhva’s dualism. It is by omitting such considerations that it becomes possible for Bede to present Vaishnava Vedanta and *bhakti* as subordinate to the notion of *advaita* and at times even Shankara.

It may be meaningful to place Bede’s emphasis on the term non-duality as referring to spiritual *experience* in the context of his theological project, wherein the rationalism of modern society is deplored for separating man both from God and creation. This is exactly what makes non-duality so crucial for Bede’s theology: “The importance of integration is often misunderstood, and it is frequently thought that on reaching the level of non-dual awareness everything disappears and there is simply pure identity of being...”³⁸²

Based on this summary of the double meaning of *advaita* in Bede’s works we may return to the issue of how the distinction between dual and non-dual religions was more important for Bede than the difference between theism and non-theism. Except for the relatively strong support for Advaita Vedanta in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* and *Return to the Centre*, in his later works Bede never questioned the validity of the conventional understanding of God as a person (or rather an interpersonal, Trinitarian communion). Similarly, his Christology remained a stable factor in his theological writings throughout this later period. Based on my survey of Bede’s writings it would seem that he took the validity of Trinitarian theology for granted, and that accordingly, even though Vaishnava Vedanta and *bhakti* may seem to parallel or resemble Christian monotheism, they do not hold the same significance for his theology as the *experience* of integration, of non-duality—of being related to God, one’s neighbour and creation. In this regard, then, Advaita Vedanta might have been more appealing and useful for Bede’s theological project.

On one particular issue, however, Bede seems to have been influenced not primarily by the experience of *advaita*, but by its existential purport: to the effect that he adheres to the Vedantic scheme, in his interpretation of *nirguna brahman* as referring to the Father and *saguna brahman* as referring to the Son, in effect Bede makes either the Father or the Son distinct from, and less than the other. We have quoted Bede as stating that while Jesus referred to the name and form of the Father, the Father is actually without of form, *arupa*.³⁸³

³⁸¹ See above, p. 24.

³⁸² Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 56.

³⁸³ Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 11.

The theistic schools of Vedanta emphasise that it is to the *saguna* aspect of God that love and devotion may be directed, yet for Bede *saguna* is ultimately transient, and needs to be transcended. We have seen how Bede acknowledged the validity of both the personal and impersonal descriptions of God as true; yet the same insistence on equality is not present in his understanding of *nirguna brahman* as beyond the transient *saguna brahman*. This was also observed by Fastiggi and Pereira, who conclude that “from the Hindu viewpoint, the Qualified Absolute is an inferior aspect of the deity, an illusory deformation of it projected by an ontological ignorance.”³⁸⁴ On this issue, then, Bede may be said to unequivocally side with Advaita Vedanta.

How Bede’s writings on Hinduism may be perceived by Hindus largely remains outside the scope of this dissertation. We have seen how Bede himself asked how Hindus may react to his notion that Christianity complements Hinduism, but such topics are generally of little significance in his works; rather than focusing on how Hindus may learn from Christians, Bede’s agenda is just the opposite, as may be expected in the works of a Christian monk addressing a predominantly Christian audience. Bede’s reflections on Hinduism are those of a Christian theologian’s: accordingly the significance allotted to Hindu mythology is limited in that it is neither treated as a religious phenomenon to be analysed according to scholarly methods, nor as inherently true or meaningful in its own right. Rather, their meaning is assessed from a Christian perspective. For Bede Christ may not be equated with an *avatara*, whereas Krishna and Buddha may be described as extending from the Cosmic Christ, in that they belong to the realm of “cosmic religion.” The Cosmic Christ is the source of both the historical and the cosmic revelations; it is in him and through him that religious unity may be achieved, and for Bede it is primarily through its connection to the Cosmic Christ that Hinduism receives its full significance.

Yet while the premises and the context of Bede’s engagement with Hinduism is his own Christian faith, we have also seen how he not only called for a dialogue between the two, but a marriage, even though his own participation in the Hindu-Christian dialogue was quite limited. His lack of contact with leading representatives of Hinduism is also reflected in his writings on Hinduism, even if only indirectly; to my knowledge Bede never mentions how his understanding of any particular issue might have been influenced through encounters with such representatives of Hinduism. When referring to the influence of Hindu theologians on

³⁸⁴ Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, “The Swami from Oxford”, http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=3427 (last accessed 04-24-2007).

his own ideas, Bede always refers to written sources he has studied, and not Hindus with whom he might have met and discussed—Hindus who might have challenged or modified his conclusions.

Similarly, Bede's criticism of Hindu scriptures and myths, Vedantic *acaryas* and their modern-day interpreters is always based on his own personal studies. In this particular regard, it is difficult to characterise Bede's engagement as dialogue. Indeed, at times Bede would confess to feeling that Hindus were not really interested in dialogue, since they allegedly did not pay any particular importance to the differences between Christianity and Hinduism, perceiving the two religions as identical. In an early letter to his friend Martyn Skinner, Bede even stated that "I am of the opinion that there is not very much deep spiritual life to be found in India to-day."³⁸⁵

Yet despite his misgivings about religious dialogue, the insistence on how Christianity stands to benefit from approaching Hinduism continues to be a leitmotif throughout Bede's works. Based on my survey it would be possible to conclude that Bede's own approach to Hinduism, as well as the approach he urged others to undertake, is in some sense not a dialogue at all, but rather a sympathetic approach to Hindu scriptures, to the philosophy and metaphysics of Vedanta and its modern interpreters. When urging "Western" or Christian readers to approach the intuitive wisdom of Hinduism, Bede does not call for them to meet with experienced Hindu authorities or to visit Hindu ashrams, but rather he urges his readers to study the Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gita* and contemporary writers such as Aurobindo. To encounter Hinduism, in short, is to encounter Hindu literature.

Concluding remarks

Everywhere religions are a source of conflict and violence. The only way we can overcome this is when we go beyond the limits of each religion and realize the transcendent mystery which is manifest in all of them. It does not mean, of course, that we simply ignore the differences. Unfortunately, that is a danger in India, where they tend to say that all the religions are the same, that differences do not matter.

—Bede Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, p. 92-93.

³⁸⁵ Griffiths, Letter to Martyn Skinner dated November 19th, 1961, quoted in du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, p. 143.

In this dissertation we have observed several constants in Bede's outlook on Hinduism: its mythological foundation, its position as a "cosmic" religion, and its role as complementary to Christianity. Yet throughout his writings, Bede's assessment and presentation of various notions from the various Hindu traditions underwent a noteworthy development.

As previously discussed in this conclusion, there is a certain synchronic consistency between the priorities in Bede's theological project and his exposition on *advaita*. For example, in *A New Vision of Reality*, when Bede's evaluation of science and religion was modified, he similarly modified his stance on Vedanta, which was said to be surpassed by *tantra*. As we have seen, at this time Bede would also stress the significance of integration, at the same time emphasising that integration may also be accommodated by the notion of *advaita*, even if this meant questioning the common understanding of Shankara.

This again serves to illustrate how Hinduism was in one sense just one of several factors in Bede's theological project, and would be treated accordingly; both the assessment and the factual presentation of Vedanta and Hinduism would be modified in accordance with how his theological project evolved—Hinduism is never treated in isolation, but as part of a larger effort. In the words of du Boulay: "[Bede's] great gift was for the overarching synthesis, his vision spanning many different disciplines in search of the truth he was seeking."³⁸⁶ Trapnell concurs, seeing synthesis as "one of the distinguishing characteristics of his contribution."³⁸⁷

Yet we have also seen how Bede's presentation not only of minutiae, but even some of the fundamentals of Vedanta and Hinduism is lacking in accuracy, as described in the above exposition on strategies used by Bede. Accordingly, several of Bede's conclusions about Hinduism are affected by how he selects, reinterprets, omits and simplifies aspects of Vedanta and Hinduism.

Throughout his writings Bede continued to focus on the significance of the notion of *advaita* as well as the teachings of Shankara and the Vedantic school of Advaita. Yet as we have seen, except for certain passages in *Vedanta and Christian Faith* and *Return to the Centre*, in fact Bede's general sentiment as well as his ongoing reinterpretation of *advaita* is more in line with Vaishnava Vedanta and Christianity in its focus on intercommunion, the Trinity and an emphasis on individual existence. While Bede to some extent criticised Shankara and Advaita Vedanta, his continued reference to the notion of *advaita* as the topmost achievement of Hinduism also implied presenting Christianity as adding crucial nuances to Hinduism, even though several of these nuances were also identified by Bede as

³⁸⁶ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 207.

³⁸⁷ Trapnell, *The Other Half of my Soul*, 11.

present in Vaishnava Vedanta. Summing up, Bede's *advaita* is not identical with Advaita Vedanta, but rather an amalgamation of different Vedantic notions within a Christian context.

Bede's assessment on Hinduism is based on his factual presentation of it; however, he also seeks to *reinterpret* the Hindu notions he has described. Sometimes his comparison of Hinduism with Christianity is based on such reinterpretations rather than his factual presentation. Furthermore, Bede's own conclusions on issues such as universal salvation are sometimes at odds not only with Church dogmas as they are commonly understood, but also with the common understanding of Hinduism, as in his exposition of reincarnation in *River of Compassion*. We have seen how Fastiggi and Pereira asked whether Bede did in fact preach "the theosophical unity of faiths."³⁸⁸ While it is not our task to answer this question, it is significant for an accurate understanding of Bede's theology to note that certain of his conclusions cross beyond the confines of Catholicism and Vedanta, arriving at a position from which Hinduism and Christianity are understood in a novel and original manner.

Trapnell has observed how both Hindus and Christians have identified weaknesses "in Griffiths' methodology and conclusions."³⁸⁹ We have seen how King could refer to notions in Bede's writings as "simplistic," and how his works contain several contradictions. At a memorial service in honour of Bede, his friend Raimundo Panikkar remarked how "[w]e can find fault with many of his ideas in which the presentation was not up to the point. That was not his forte. That was not his mission."³⁹⁰ Perhaps Bede's theology and his presentation of Vedanta may best be described as a complex attempt at synthesis, based on premises which are not always accurate or conventional.

Bede's opposition to "dualism" was an ongoing struggle. Du Boulay identifies several of the opposites Bede sought to reconcile, including "science and religion, West and East, masculine and feminine, reason and intuition."³⁹¹ Such a focus on dichotomies in turn influences Bede's theological project.

In my opinion this is perhaps the greatest paradox of Bede's presentation of Hinduism: Many of the issues discussed in his writings are in fact complex rather than dual, yet Bede presents such issues by means of opposites such as "East" and "West", "cosmic" and "historical," wanting to arrive at a "non-dual" synthesis which is intended to transcend

³⁸⁸ Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, "The Swami from Oxford", http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=3427 (last accessed 04-24-2007).

³⁸⁹ Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 199.

³⁹⁰ Raimundo Panikkar, quoted in Kenneth Cracknell's preface to Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, xii.

³⁹¹ Du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness*, 137.

opposites. Yet interestingly, the conclusion he arrives at is often in fact *complex* as much as it is unified.

This is particularly so in his notion of *advaita*: for Bede, how to “transcend dualism ... is our problem,” since “[a]ll these religious divisions stem from the philosophy of dualism.” Yet Bede’s own theological conclusion is not monistic *advaita* so much as an integrative synthesis, accommodating for the distinctiveness of creation, the individual and the Trinity.

Instead of referring to religious *plurality*, Bede speaks of opposites which he seeks to reconcile through the notion of *advaita*, which is conceived not as “non-dual,” but as complex. Hence the paradox: for while Bede sees dualism as insufficient, the “non-dual” is perceived as important *just because it allows for nuances*—nuances which are in fact often present in what Bede presented as “dual” to begin with.

We have quoted Bede as saying that there is a “danger in India” insofar as “they tend to say that all the religions are the same.” At the very beginning of “Hinduism and Christianity” Brockington points out how

within the context of worship, there is the tendency to view Christianity as monotheistic and Hinduism as polytheistic. This results in effect from the application of a double standard, whereby Christianity is judged at the level of its doctrinal formulations and Hinduism is judged by its day-to-day practice. If both were judged at the same level, the distinction would not seem nearly as clear-cut.³⁹²

In the light of this observation one might question the validity as well as the effect of Bede’s statement. Of course there are Hindus who subscribe to the view presented by Bede, just like there are Christians who continue to subscribe to the fulfilment theory expressed in his earliest writings. Yet if one were to compare the tenets held by leaders within the Vedantic sampradayas with those of Catholic theologians, the conclusions reached might be quite different from the observations presented by Bede.

Klaus Klostermaier, who spent two years as a Catholic priest in Vrindavan in the 1960’s, and who actually met and discussed extensively with Hindu authorities, in his memoirs from this period presents a conclusion which is quite different from that of Bede’s: “Christ is not identical with Krishna and Rama – the Hindus too, know that.”³⁹³

Finally, as we have seen, the notion that “all the religions are the same” is emphatically not valid in the Vedantic discourse, in which Bede seeks to engage, and which he identifies as

³⁹² Brockington, *Hinduism and Christianity*, 1.

³⁹³ Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindavan* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 114.

“the orthodox tradition of Hinduism.”³⁹⁴ Within the Vedantic discourse it would be difficult to hold that religious “differences do not matter,” even if some Hindus may use such an expression. For while Bede would, based on his notions of the perennial philosophy and “the cosmic revelation” see one single truth reflected in all religion, a truth which it is equally valid to describe in personal as impersonal terms, such differences *do* matter in the Vedantic discourse, just as they do in Christian theology.

³⁹⁴ Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*, 101.

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